



**2023 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES**  
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES, & EDUCATION JANUARY 4 - 6, 2023  
PRINCE WAIKIKI RESORT, HONOLULU, HAWAII

# SOCIAL PRESENCE IN COLLEGE LEVEL ONLINE COURSES

VAN ALSTYNE, BRAD

COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES DEPARTMENT  
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
CALIFORNIA

SOCIAL PRESENCE IN COLLEGE LEVEL ONLINE COURSES

DETERMINING AND IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PRESENCE IN COLLEGE LEVEL  
ONLINE COURSES USING STUDENT INPUT: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS SUP-  
PORTING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COURSE DESIGN

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Doctoral Degree in Transformative Studies  
California Institute of Integral Studies

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### Abstract

As online education continues to grow as a method to deliver education at the college and university level, research on online education has shifted from studying the technology and its ability to deliver course content to trying to better understand what encourages a positive online experience for instructors and students.

The marked difference between a virtual classroom as opposed to a physical one has shifted technology-focused research to research that inquires about the vitality of the social environment in virtual venues. It is conceived that *social presence* is what makes the virtual experience feel real and sustains student's attention and engagement and thus informs students' satisfaction with a course.

This inquiry argues that this shift of focus to social presence should play a role in the development of online courses and most importantly that students and instructors should play a role in determining what types of processes might be implemented to lead to social presence. In other words, whereas educators more often than not, take for granted the virtues of the physical classroom, they arguably must be conscious of designing the virtual environment to encourage social presence, the feeling of really being there with others.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: THESIS STATEMENT/INQUIRY QUESTION**

The primary focus of this dissertation is to create a conceptual understanding for planning and implementing online courses that regards as critical, factors of social presence (SP) and student involvement in fostering it.

In my third decade as an instructor at the college level and having served in many administrative positions as well, I have been witness to many changes in the educational landscape. None to date, however has been as significant and broad reaching as the creation of online learning. Like many educational innovations before, online learning has the potential to offer solutions regarding education and dreams of the availability of higher learning to all those who seek a degree. But how will education reach the people? Is it conceivable that everyone will have the opportunity to physically attend college? Can the existing economic paradigm by which American colleges have historically existed continue to work? Does our existing curriculum and methods of curriculum delivery provide effective and accessible learning opportunities?

There are no perfect answers to these questions, but for educational reformers, these may be among the most pressing questions of the day. MOOCS (Massive Online Open Courses) seem poised to bridge the gap, but recent critiques regarding completion rates; Snyder (2013), Parr (2013), Hamilton (2014) and Knox (2016) seem to suggest otherwise.

Though the college and university system must change with the times and attempt, in doing so, to address the uncertainties of the future, what has become clear is the growth of online learning as an alternative to traditional classroom learning. Since 2002, Allen and Seamen (2013) have documented online growth at the college level. Their 2013 report recorded an increase of students taking at least one online course to 570,000 bringing the overall total to 6.7 million or 32.0 percent of all college students (p. 4).

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With online learning still fairly new in terms of educational methods of delivery, there has been extensive focus on student perceptions and factors for success. Most notably *social presence* (SP) defined here as culture and experience of the classroom as perceived by students, has been identified as among the most consistent factors for success and *teacher immediacy behavior* has been isolated as amongst the most common factor leading to the perception of SP (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Teacher immediacy behaviors as the term suggests are those that make instructors seem approachable and concerned with the welfare of their students. Students who have perceived their instructor's behavior as high in immediacy have reported positive effects such as increased satisfaction (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996), increased motivation (Christophel, 1990), and course activities and self-estimates of learning (Campbell, 2014) to name a few.

Even with the obvious growth in online education and the findings regarding teacher immediacy, other elements such as instructor impressions regarding the value of SP have been largely ignored. Most studies in regards to instructors and online learning focus on strategies in regards to delivering content (Borko, Whitcomb, & Liston, 2009; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Moore & Kearsley, 2011), but few if any actually focus on instructor attitudes regarding the perceived value of SP and the larger issue of what effective teaching online looks like is still unclear (Perry & Edwards, 2014). Not considering perceived values of SP is a significant oversight, as online courses ideally begin with the instructor's efforts to design a virtual course that encourage students to create and sustain the online classroom space. Regarding instructor relationship to online learning, Allen and Seaman (2008) report:

Six years of data show only a small improvement in the proportion of institutions who say that their faculty fully accept the value and

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legitimacy of online education. A majority of institutions remain either neutral or negative on this issue. We know, however, that there are huge differences in this belief between those who have no plans for online (where only 3.7% say their faculty accept it) and those institutions that are already fully engaged with online (where the percentage jumps to 62.1).

(p. 1)

The growth of online learning coupled with resistance by many instructors to the legitimacy of electronic educational mediums, further underscores the need for research into instructor and student satisfaction with the virtual classroom. If online learning is to become the vehicle by which education is made available to all, it is imperative that we begin to address the issues by which these courses can be successfully created and delivered. This inquiry argues that the ongoing analysis and development of online programs should include an effort to utilize instructors and students in the identification and implementation of the SP factor, which is known to contribute to student satisfaction with online courses.

Deliberate processes for instructor and student participation could help in two ways. First, it allows a student the chance to better understand and consider the role that SP might play in their online classroom space and how that might help them succeed in the virtual classroom setting. Second, it allows for faculty to be aware of and alert to classroom climate and to take action to improve it. The very act of checking in with students is one consistent with fostering social presence and involves instructors in the dynamics of enacting it.

Further, courses, technology, and even teachers are subject to change; students in a given class also change every semester. The ever-changing classroom landscape seems to necessitate a process which allows the definition of and implementation of SP to be adaptive as well.

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Through this study, I am offering a conceptual understanding of the social dimension of the virtual learning space and its role in sustaining online engagement, while also suggesting practices that enact social presence.

The following are the considerations that will guide this study:

1. Online learning continues to grow as a method of delivering education.
2. SP is a widely identified factor for student satisfaction with online courses.
3. Involving students in course design that fosters SP can be a way to encourage student SP and instructor immediacy behaviors (those associated with positive outcomes or feelings of affect)
4. Important to understanding the quality of SP is finding ways to conceptualize the social dynamics within a learning environment.

### **Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Approaches:**

#### **Towards a Student-centered Approach**

Research for having students participate along with their instructors, in creating conditions for SP, has yet to be undertaken. In the absence of such research, it seems best to focus on considerations that support such an effort and that have paved the way for this idea. I take a multidisciplinary approach that includes reviewing the current literature on SP as well as exploring theories such as Self Identity (SI), Categorization Theory (CT), the Community of Inquiry framework (COI), Systems Theory and Constructivism, which focus on student experience online. Through this research, the importance of SP in online learning and the social dynamics of learning spaces combine to help frame an argument for a student-centered approach towards a deliberate fostering of SP in online classrooms. It is important to recognize that the study is not concerned with arriving at a universal definition of SP, rather it is focused on the basis for devel-

oping a process whereby students' subjective experience of SP or lack thereof drive enhancements of the social dimensions of the learning experience.

Since my analysis relies so heavily on faculty and student perceptions regarding their experiences of the SP process, I intend to provide a clearer picture of the online experience, i.e. the online space. To reiterate, I will apply a constructivist viewpoint and also enlist Social Identity and Categorization theories in the context of virtual experience towards this intention.

### **Personal Relationship to the Inquiry**

Finally, I will draw on my own experience developing and teaching online programs for the past 15 years at the college undergraduate level and the successes and failures I have encountered as an online instructor, curriculum developer, administrator and architect of online programs. I believe my experience is valuable to this inquiry, as I have always worked (and struggled at times) to deliver instruction based on the needs of students as well as teaching the subject matter. I would also like to briefly mention one of my primary motivations for this project; my experience as a father of a disabled child. My son suffered a stroke at birth that effectively wiped out the language processing portion of his brain. Essentially, he has difficulty processing speech so a classroom lecture to him is like a foreign language to a non-native speaker. Not having this function means that he is purely a visual learner and technology has allowed him to keep up in his classes. It has not been the technology alone however; each of his 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers has a webpage, which they conduct with what I, and more importantly he, regards as having high potential for SP. I hope that this inquiry will help to create and facilitate the future development of a process that forefronts SP as part of the design for online courses. I am, thus advocating for my son as well as all of the other students with a range of needs and for whom SP is a critical factor in their online learning.

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It is my hope that the outcome of this project is a starting point for the creation of a new, focused direction in which SP will become a “process” rather than just a phenomenon, one that is undertaken in online courses as a partnership between instructors and students. The existing literature on SP as well as the theories that speak to the student experience would seem to indicate that this partnership is a significant factor for a satisfying and engaged online experience.

### **Significance**

The original contribution of this dissertation, is to suggest and hopefully initiate the process of identifying ways in which students and faculty can play a role in the development of SP in the online courses they take and teach. There is currently no process identified in the literature that lets students speak to what SP means to them. I suggest that this simple step will allow for a new, more hands-on method for the creation of SP in online courses, which in turn may yield new ways to evoke SP and to allow SP and processes for facilitating SP to change with the students and courses we teach. I also suggest that this new approach, one which treats SP as more of a deliberate practice or process and less as a taken-for-granted phenomena, will also create new directions for research that are population specific. For example, for students of different cultures or different learning styles, for whom ways of “being there” may take different forms. The intention for this inquiry is to be a starting point for that conversation in which student and instructor experiences will remain in the forefront of the development of online programs.

As an educator and administrator at the college level for over 25 years I have seen drastic changes in the learning needs of students and thus the universities which hope to serve those students. By focusing on those who teach and those who take online classes, it is my hope that the future development of online programs take place with instructor and students in mind so that online education can be delivered in a way that is most beneficial and rewarding to both.



### **Scope and Critical Assessment (Delimitations and Limitations)**

A potential limit of this study is that it is entirely based on the literature and my teaching experience. Qualitative and quantitative data to ground conceptual conclusions of the study are left for others to research. Instead, this study addresses the fact that research on the development of online educational programs is plentiful, yet there are no over-arching guides or agreements that offer specificity as to how to ensure engaged learners. It can be argued that constructivism, for example, may not lend itself to certain teaching styles, curriculum or subject matter. It can be similarly argued that SP is not the most important factor in student success or learning. SP and thus the creation and maintenance of a learning community online, may also not be important to students or faculty. Either way, SP, constructivism, and the effort to better understand the student space are certainly not the only theories of education that apply to online learning and development and may not be appropriate given the various learning styles present in different online populations. That said, it is the intention of this study to present the importance of SP in online learning where the absence of physical presence and absence of a contained physical space require that social presence be deliberately fostered. Finally, the limited focus on SP as a process among students and between students and instructors does not include a broader stakeholder form of analysis. Such an analysis would include administrative factors such as economic and growth-based goals and available university resources or even available technology. SP is certainly not universal to all learners and teachers in different institutions and may not be what decision makers (administrators, faculty and staff) view as most important.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are a variety of definitions and conceptualization of SP (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). This lack of consensus has prevented educators from recognizing the significance of SP in a way that could lead to its systematic fostering in online education. The issue of working towards actual application of an SP-fostering process with students and faculty is thus not practically considered. Rettie (2003) argues that the concept of SP remains unclear due to the two distinct ways in which it has been applied (to the virtual medium and to the perception of the participants). Shen and Khalifa (2009) point out the difficulties of focusing on the medium rather than design factors. He writes,

Following the medium driven perspective, most prior studies consider social presence as a static media characteristic. Using face-to-face communication as the benchmark, such studies categorize different media to be high or low in social presence without examining the relationship between specific design relevant to social presence. (p. 36)

Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2003) document six different definitions of SP and two primary conceptualizations; telepresence or the feeling of being in a space and social presence (p. 8). This underscores that SP research to “bring conceptual clarity to what is currently a rather amorphous set of variables, many of which are being equated or conflated with social presence” (p. 2), remains a problem. Lombard and Ditton (1997) have identified six different conceptualizations of SP: social richness, realism, transportation to a different *space*, the perceptual and psychological immersion in the *virtual world*, as a social actor within a medium and, as medium as social actor (pp. 4-10). They write,

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Despite the centrality and importance of presence, it has not yet been carefully explicated, operationalized or studied. The work that has been done is fragmentary and unsystematic, in part because the people interested in presence come from many academic fields (including communication, psychology, cognitive science, engineering, philosophy and the arts. (p. 3)

In this study, the review of literature will begin with demographic factors related to online learning, student feedback regarding online experiences particularly student satisfaction data, and the concept of SP and teacher feedback regarding the experience of teaching online. I will conclude with the research that speaks to the development of a multidisciplinary approach. To better understand the current online learning environment from a social perspective for students and faculty, ideas from Constructivism, Social Identification and Categorization theories will be discussed. I have also included a section addressing the benefits of online education to “other” student populations. Though the research here is primarily focused on benefits of online learning in general, I believe that this is an area where future research on SP could prove to be quite valuable. In an attempt to present the idea of developing a working process for identifying and implementing SP before or even during the course of a class, it is important to develop a clear understanding of what the current online experience is for students and faculty. A clearer understanding of the online experience for those involved should be a primary factor in considering the process by which SP can be “operationalized” and assessed in real time.

### **Online Growth**

Online education continues to grow even as overall college enrollments decrease. In their annual report on the state of online education in the United States, *Grade Increase: Tracking Distance Education in the United States*, Seaman, Allen and Seaman, (2018) report that from

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2015-2016 the number of students taking at least one online course grew 5.6% to 6,359,121, comprising 31.6% of all students (p. 11). The authors also note that a large concentration of the population were enrolled in just 5% of all universities, most of which are for-profit (p. 3). It is important to note that such a large number of online students are enrolled in for-profit colleges and universities where education is a business-first proposition. As non-profit colleges and universities see drastic enrollment decreases, the competition for students becomes a necessity of survival, thus making the development of online courses and programs a necessity. The competition for students, specifically online students, has necessitated the identification and implementation of factors such as SP that lead to student satisfaction towards enrollment and retention.

Online education has also seen significant growth in K-12 facilitating the need for instructors and administrators to keep up with the latest changes in technologies, vendors and potential applications. (Gemin & Pape, 2017). As the technical skills of K-12 students continue to evolve, and their familiarity with online coursework becomes greater, it becomes increasingly important to consider the factors of online delivery that will best serve them. Gulosino and Miron (2017) write “Although virtual and blended schools still account for a relatively small portion of the overall school choice options in the US, they constitute some of the fastest-growing options, overlapping with both homeschooling and charter schools.”(p. 11) The reality is that most colleges cannot afford to keep up with technology at the rate our students do, and at the rate they are becoming more digitally literate, it probably doesn’t make financial sense to try. The increasing levels of computer literacy necessitates further exploration into factors such as SP that can shape the student experience. The technology by which we deliver courses will almost always change at some point, facilitating, I believe the necessity and intentionality by which we design courses towards a student-focus. The emphasis then becomes realizing the duality in purpose of technol-

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ogy and student needs where the technology facilitates the interplay between course, student and instructor, but SP becomes the primary factor in the relationship between instructor and students and becomes the bond between the two. While few forms of technology can save a poorly designed and delivered online course, I believe a well-intentioned instruction towards SP can, in most cases overcome poor technology.

### **Student Feedback: Social Presence**

Student feedback at the university level is a highly complex matter, usually involving institutional-wide surveys issued to students either in class or online. Many colleges and universities base a good deal of their institution-wide decisions on the results of these surveys, as enrollment (and thus, student satisfaction) has always been one of the most important factors for schools nation-wide. As tuition continues to rise and enrollment has continued to decline, in California, home to the nation's largest post-secondary education system, "policy makers and community college officials are looking to online learning as one way to better serve student needs, increase access, promote completion, and increase transfer to four-year universities-all in a cost effective manner" (Johnson & Mejia, 2014, p. 3).

For the purposes of this study, I will define student satisfaction as the perceived value of his or her educational experiences at an educational institution (Astin, 1993). Student satisfaction with online education can vary based on a variety of experiences from social to educational and intrinsic factors. Herbert (2006) identified several factors key to student success in online courses including faculty responsiveness to student's needs, quality of online instruction, timely faculty feedback, institutional response to questions in a timely manner, frequency of student and instructor interaction, availability of adequate financial aid and student-to-student collaboration.

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On this list, responsiveness to student needs, timely feedback, frequency of student and instructor interaction and student-to-student collaboration are all factors commonly associated with SP.

Lorenzo (2012) lists 7 components to success including a reliable technology system, clear guidelines for class assignments and faculty feedback, appropriate technology standards to deliver instruction, meaningful learning experiences to demonstrate students' ability of analysis, synthesis and evaluating content, facilitated interaction among students and between students and faculty facilitation of student self-motivation and commitment, and access to adequate technical assistance and orientation prior to the course. Though there are many factors involved in student satisfaction of online learning, among the most frequently cited is SP (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Swan, & Shih, 2005; Kop, 2011; Kreijns, Kirshner, & Jochems, 2003; Tu, & McIsaac, 2002).

The history of SP and its current role in online education figures prominently in the literature on student perceptions of online coursework. The primary purpose here is to show that while current research on SP shows great promise in regard to the continued development of online courses, there are several missing pieces, which should be included in future research. Among the most significant are instructor's perceptions of SP, as well as any effort or discussion to create a tool by which SP might be implemented in online classes across the curriculum.

### **Social Presence Defined**

The idea of SP, as well as its role in electronic communication mediums, was originally discussed by Short, Williams, and Christie in their book *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications* (1976). There, they defined SP as "The degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience (and perceived intimacy and immediacy) of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 164). In their discussion of the effects of different electronic communi-

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cations mediums on users, the authors emphasize that most individuals will seek out the mediums they feel will offer SP and avoid those that do not (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). In particular, their work emphasizes the desire of users of electronic mediums to choose video applications over those featuring only audio as the face to face interaction is perceived as potentially richer or of greater interpersonal quality.

Though their definition focuses largely on the experience in electronic educational settings, SP as I will be examining it, is the extent to which a student feels connected in the larger fabric of the classroom experience and the extent to which they see themselves as an important part of the educational process. A more global focus I am using is offered by Richardson and Swan (2003), “originally construed as an inherent feature of differing media, social presence may also be explored by examining a variety of issues which may contribute to the social climate of the classroom” (p. 70).

Though the idea of SP only goes back to 1976, there has been no shortage of studies that attempt to isolate the factors that lead to SP. Among those are frequency of student/teacher interactions (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2007), perceived levels of instructor activity (Swan & Shih, 2005), student led discussions (Rourke & Anderson, 2002), and perceived group membership (Rogers & Lea, 2005).

### **Immediacy Behaviors**

Among the classroom perceptions that students report as factors in experiencing SP, the most commonly reported is teacher immediacy behaviors. The concept of teacher immediacy was originally reported by Wiener and Mehrabian (1968) and was defined as “the distance a communicator puts between themselves and the object of their message” (p. 3).

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The majority of the research on teacher immediacy usually focuses on verbal and non-verbal behavior as the factors regularly associated with the perception of immediacy, and thus SP (Rourke et al., 2007). Students who have perceived their instructor's behavior as high in immediacy have reported positive effects such as increased satisfaction (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996; Russo & Benson 2005; Ni & Aust 2008; Bozkaya & Ayem, 2008; Arbaugh, 2010), increased motivation (Christophel, 1990; Chakraborty, 2017), performance (Campbell, 2014) and perceived instructor credibility (Trad, Katt, & Miller, 2014). More specifically, for the purpose of this study, a brief review of the literature on immediacy behaviors will be presented here. There are a variety of immediacy behaviors which have shown to lead to SP in online settings including individualized communications with supportive comments (Campbell, 2014), face-to-face video conferencing (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009), humor, instructor self-disclosure and expression of personal values, use of descriptive terms that indicate feelings, using salutations and greeting, referring to students by name, expressing approval and asking questions, (Richardson, et.al. 2015) and embedding social media use into courses (Brownson, 2014) and text messaging students (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside, & Lewis, 2013) to name a few.

Shea, Hayes and Vickers (2010) suggest a variety of ideas for instructors to facilitate presence through immediacy behaviors including explaining the role and importance of instructor-student and student-to-student interaction to students early on, using an announcement feature to comment on group discussion progress, facilitating one-on-one interactions with students separately from the course (contacting students via email or other channels separate from the course), posting frequent class reminders (to show an interest and remain current), and relate discussion concepts to other learning opportunities (guide students towards additional resources and directions for further clarity). The authors also offer some ideas for students to become facilita-



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tors of presence (one of the very few researchers who do so) through encouraging initial discussion, modeling how to ask probing questions, and assigning students roles as moderators responsible for summarizing integrating other student responses towards discussion and class goals.

Richardson, et.al. (2015) offer a comprehensive list of activities to promote immediacy behaviors towards the creation of SP, a portion of which includes:

Self-disclosure (e.g., instructor discloses about current events in their lives/educational background, family background, social manner, and hobbies), expressing personal values, beliefs & attitudes, The use of text, emoticons, or unusual punctuation to express "non-verbal" emotions (i.e. exaggerated punctuation or spelling) and use of descriptive words that indicate feelings (i.e. love, sad, hate, silly), enthusiasm, or social excitement, use of humor teasing, cajoling, irony, sarcasm, understatement, shares personal pictures; use of rich media to project instructor's voice or face, salutations, greetings, closures addressing students/peers by name, referring to the group as "we," "us," "our", promotes collaboration or working-together among students, communicates acceptance of diverse learners, referring directly to the contents of others' messages; quoting from others' messages, acknowledging student work./submissions, expressing agreement or disagreement with others' messages, expressing approval, offering praise, encouragement, asking questions or otherwise inviting response. Note: these prompts are designed to invite students to continue a conversation but are not required. (pp. 282-286)

The research on immediacy behaviors in online settings resulting in or encouraging the feeling of SP in highly diverse yet offers few examples of real-time implementation. It is still encouraging however because while it can be difficult to reshape the behaviors or personality traits of a classroom instructor, an online instructor, at the most basic level,

can simply change their approach in the form of text. This concept will be explored further in the later stages of this study.

### **Instructor Feedback**

One of the more comprehensive efforts to gauge the development of online education in the United States is the annual report *Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States*. In their 2010 annual report of online education, Seaman and Allen (2011) report that online education has continued to grow in the U.S. with a total of 6.1 million students reported to have taken at least one online course in 2010, an increase of 560,000 students from the previous year (p. 4). In this same report, however the increase of faculty acceptance of the legitimacy of online delivery is 32 percent, an increase of less than 6 percent from 2002 to 2011 (p. 5). Arguably, the success of any course or method of delivery for that matter, must have faculty support. Why then, with online enrollment numbers continuing to grow, are faculty still reluctant to accept online delivery as a legitimate form of course implementation? One possible explanation could be the training supplied for instructors. Allen and Seaman (2011) report that nearly one-fifth of all academic institutions provide no online training for their faculty (p. 19). This is particularly significant when one compares the level of online training with the normal amount of training provided in most single subject and multi-subject credential programs. These are amongst the most structured and intensive programs, which offer not only classroom-based instruction but field preparation as well in the form of student teaching. It comes as no surprise then, that teachers' perceptions of technology are influenced by teaching experience as well as experience using technology (Bussey, Dormody & VanLeeuwen, 2000; Stromfors, Glazewski, & Brush, 2002; Kanaya, Light, McMillan, & Culp, 2005), as well as factors such as university leadership (Hogarty, Lang, &

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Kromrey, 2003). Other factors relating to faculty satisfaction include Intellectual challenge and an interest in technology (Panda & Mishra, 2007), self-gratification (Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 1999), collaboration opportunities with other faculty (Allen & Seaman, 2007), compensation and course quality (Bower, 2001), and prior experience with technology (Tanner, Noser, & Totaro, 2009).

Overall, faculty acceptance of online instruction tends to vary. Mitchell and Geva-May (2009) found that institutional decision makers reported an increase of faculty acceptance while Allen and Seaman (2013) found that just over 30% of chief academic officers felt their faculty considered online learning a legitimate form of delivery. Acceptance can, however be increased with supports.

Issues regarding technology often appear in the research on faculty acceptance.(Salas 2016; Wingo, Ivankova, & Moss, 2017). Baz (2016) notes that acceptance of technology will often dictate the level to which instructors are successful or unsuccessful teaching online. Subject matter that necessitates the use of online materials as part of delivery, however (in this case Education in Foreign Language courses utilizing online language platforms as a tool) usually led to an increased level of acceptance on the part of the faculty. In a review of the literature on faculty perceptions of usefulness of instructional technologies, Salas (2016) recommends faculty involvement in the selection of online technologies as a way to ease concerns and facilitate use. Lei and Gupta (2010) also recommend faculty inclusion in the process of choosing technologies as a way to alleviate negative attitudes towards technology. In a review of the literature using the Technology Acceptance Model (Wingo et al., 2017) provide categories for research regarding faculty issues with technology. Among those (including a sampling of examples for each but not all examples provided by the authors for each category) are:

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**Perceived ease of use:** “Faculty were less satisfied with teaching online when they had technical problems.” “Faculty who were more confident about their technical skills were more willing to teach online.” (p. 19)

**Voluntariness:** “training faculty to teach online could promote faculty satisfaction whether teaching online was mandatory or not.” (p. 20)

**Experience:** “Faculty who had taught online were more positive about the effectiveness of online teaching”. (p. 20)

**Image:** “Faculty had concerns about how teaching online would affect their image. Faculty worried that teaching online would negatively affect their promotion and tenure process.” (p 20)

**Job Relevance:** “Faculty valued collaboration to design online courses that were student-centric.” (p. 21)

**Output Quality:** “Faculty were concerned about the effectiveness of various forms of technology used in online courses” (p. 21)

**Result Demonstrability:** “Faculty valued professional development opportunities associated with teaching online. Faculty valued training, support, and mentoring to help them succeed in teaching online” (p. 22) They write:

Fostering faculty’s acceptance of online delivery methods is critical for institutions that consider online learning to be a key part of their strategic plan; to accomplish this, administrators need to understand how faculty perceive teaching online and what factors shape those perceptions. (p.15)

### Multidisciplinary Approach

For the purpose of this review, several factors contributing to the experience of the online student towards SP will be discussed here. Though there are many factors contributing to the

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development of SP for both instructors and students, I have chosen to focus on factors presented in Social Identity Theory, Categorization Theory, the Community of Inquiry framework, Constructivism, Systems Theory and Student Centered Learning, as they are applied to online settings in the literature and which, may lend themselves to being part of a broader, experience-informed understanding of online engagement. These theories point to dimensions of the learning environment of any online course especially as it pertains to the implementation and efforts to sustain SP. Any effort to understand and implement conditions for SP must also consider how students and instructors understand their experience and how that experience relates to and develops their online *selfhood*. Understanding the various elements of the student online experience is what I suggest to be the first step in a better understanding of the student experience and arguably should be the starting point from which instructor applications of an SP process should follow.

### **Social Identity and Social Categorization Theory**

The experience of SP is a factor in the development of online selfhood. What is known for certain is that in any online course there are students and instructors and the medium used to convey the course. That being said, the ways that individuals establish their identities through the process of online learning deserves attention in the pursuit of SP. For the purpose of this study, Social identity becomes relevant in the attempt to understand how students see themselves as part of the larger online group. If students identify themselves positively with the virtual learning community, the feeling of social presence is more assured. Since one of the goals of online learning and thus arguably SP is to harness the positive presence attributes of a physical classroom setting, in this case proximity with other classmates and an instructor, it is important to understand how the online self contributes to the creation of SP.

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Social Identity Theory was first proposed by Trajfel and Turner in 1979, and focuses on the ways in which individuals perceive and develop self-concept based on group affiliation. They proposed three main assumptions:

1. Individuals will strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem: they strive for a positive self-concept.
2. Social groups or categories and the membership of them are associated with positive or negative value connotations. Hence social identity may be positive or negative according to the evaluations of the membership, which tend to be socially consensual either within or across groups.
3. The evaluation of one's own group is determined with reference to specific other groups through social comparisons in terms of value-laden attributes and characteristics. (p. 40)

Social identity theory is an important consideration in the development of SP in that any online course or learning community has the necessary components for the development of self-concept as it relates to the roles of students. For the student, the technology used to deliver online coursework, regarding the development of collective presence is the part of the process that is seen as “value-laden attributes and characteristics” (p. 40) put forth by Trajfel and Turner (1979) which in turn create a sense of self in the online space, informed largely by how the student sees themselves in relation to the group. The computer-mediated environment serves to inform the larger group as to the individual's role as participant as well as contributor through collaborative projects that are a necessary component in the development of SP.

Turner and Trajfel's 1979 work resulted in Turner proposing the theory of Social Categorization in 1985 as an extension of social identity theory, specifically “how social categorization

produces prototype-based depersonalization of self and others and thus generates social identity phenomena” (as cited in Shen & Khalifa, 2015, p.3). Social categorization theory proposes that the social categorization process is cognitive basis for group behaviors (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Simply put, members of a group will assume a group-based identity thus developing a group-founded self-concept as they experience and understand the nature of the group. Shen and Khalifa (2015) argue for the inclusion of both social identity and social categorization theory in the design of online courses as pre-determinates for community participation and thus SP. Shen and Khalifa (2010) efforts to better understand the nature of virtual community (VC) participation and the motivation of the learner towards the feeling and verification of SP led them to develop a multi-propositional format for course design:

Proposition 1: the member with strong identification with a VC will be more likely to participate in VC discussion.

Proposition 2: the member with high identity confirmation will be more likely to participate in VC discussion.

Proposition 3: the attractiveness of the members perceived VC identity is positively associated with the member’s strength of VC identification.

Proposition 4: when community presentation (work or products inclusive to the group) includes more constituents (participants or stakeholders) of VC identities, members are more likely to identify with the VC.

Proposition 5a: usage of the virtual co-presence features (features used to convey personal identities) will be positively related to members’ identification with the VC.

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Proposition 5b: usage of self-presentation features (features that help to infer profiles of specific members from historical records or profile information) will be positively related to members' identification with the VC.

Proposition 5c: other members' usage of deep profiling features (features enabling virtual co-presence or features of expression not required that cater to the needs for self-disclosure such as emoticons and avatars) will be positively related to members' identification with the VC.

Proposition 6: usage of virtual co-presence features will be positively related to the members' perceived attractiveness of VC identity (pp. 5-10).

The concept of the VC and its potential benefits is particularly relevant in online education as groups are manufactured as a function of the class and positive group behaviors are clearly defined by an instructor through evaluation, participation and assignments. The initial step of finding a group with which to identify is largely eliminated by the necessity of taking an online course, and positive group behaviors and/or norms are stated through course expectations.

The complicated nature of student perception necessitates a greater understanding of SP. Shen and Khalifa (2010) note that while SP has become a major design principle in studying computer-mediated communication, alone it is not enough:

The lack of consistent and comprehensive conceptualization of social presence makes it difficult to compare the results of different studies and hinders the development of design guidelines. Furthermore, the uni-dimensional approaches, originally developed in simple technological contexts, may not be able to capture the complex nature of social presence evoked in virtual environments with diversified technological features and rich interactions among multiple users. (p. 337)

To this end, the authors propose the relevance of better understanding of social identity



and how the creation of social identity plays a role in the perception of SP on the part of the user in a VC. They conclude that most prior research has considered “social identity as a given without examining its antecedents in general and system design impacts in particular” (p. 346). In regard to the application of social identity itself, the authors write: “VC research needs to bring system design aspects together, so as to understand the mechanisms for making system design effective and shed lights on technological determinants for VC interventions, e.g., social identification” (p. 346).

Ultimately, what becomes the issue is the delicate framework by which both social identity and social category are both understood and perceived through SP. While every student population and course are different, the basic framework can and should allow for the types of personal and group identification which is the basis for SP. What a greater understanding of social identity and social category mechanisms offer is the ability to consider the role and space of the online student. Though this is not a simple undertaking, the efforts towards a better understanding of the student online experience should ultimately result in a better understanding of students and facilitate better efforts towards SP.

### **Community of Inquiry**

The Community of Inquiry (2000) was developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (1999) as a means of looking at online courses specifically with the purpose of studying, isolating and analyzing presence. The “community” to which the authors refer is an online course and the framework identifies the interplay between three types of presence: social, teaching, and cognitive presence. “Social presence is described as the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 63). Social presence is made up

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of three main components: effective communication, open communication, and group communication. (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 63) Cognitive presence relates to the process students must go through to initiate and deliver work product and “is defined as the exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding through the process of collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 65). Teaching presence, the third major component of the framework, is the facilitation and guidance piece by which online course activities are validated or structured so that they are not merely conversations between students, (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007).

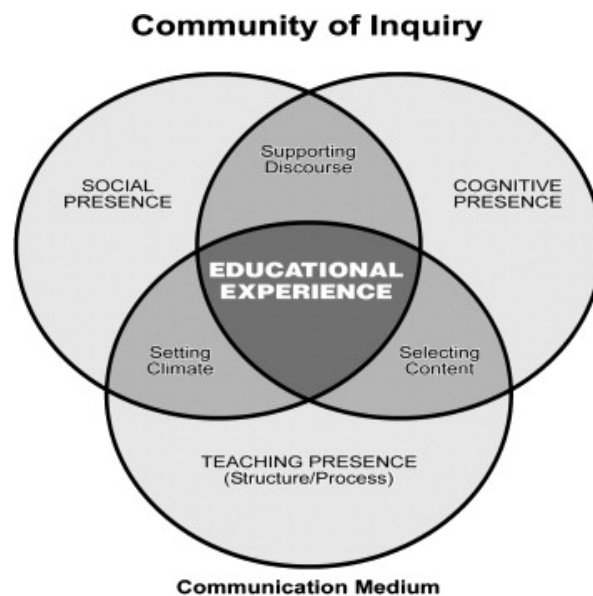


Fig. 1. Community of inquiry framework. (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 158)

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ELEMENTS	CATEGORIES	INDICATORS (examples only)
<b>Social Presence</b>	Open Communication Group Cohesion Affective Expression	Risk-free expression Encourage collaboration Emoticons
<b>Cognitive Presence</b>	Triggering Event Exploration Integration Resolution	Sense of puzzlement Information exchange Connecting ideas Apply new ideas
<b>Teaching Presence</b>	Design & Organization  Facilitating Discourse Direct Instruction	Setting curriculum & methods Sharing personal meaning Focusing discussion

Fig. 2. Community of inquiry elements, categories and indicators. (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 159)

For the purpose of this study, the Community of Inquiry framework allows us to break down the experience of an online course into participant-specific parameters so that a greater understanding of presence and the role each participant plays in the perception of presence might be better understood.

### Constructivism

For the purpose of this study, I will define constructivism as a philosophy of education in which educators view learning as a process in which students create their own reality by combining information with their own experience. It is this combination that not only helps students understand information but create a kind of bond with that information resulting in new meaning or meanings specific to them. Constructivism is largely attributed to Piaget's (1964) theories of learning processes and human behavior and is a logical choice for this study due to the system that must exist to support online programs. Glaserfeld (1995) writes,

Piaget took the notion of adaptation out of the biological context and turned it into the cornerstone of his "genetic epistemology." He had realized early on that whatever knowledge was, it was not a "copy" of reality. The relation-

ship of viable biological organisms to their environment provided a means to reformulate the relationship between the cognitive subject's conceptual structures and that subject's experiential world. Knowledge, then, could be treated, not as a more or less accurate representation of external things, situations, and events, but rather as a mapping of actions and conceptual operations that had proven viable in the knowing subject's experience. (p. 2)

Piaget (1964) believed that individuals created new knowledge through accommodation (learning through experience) and assimilation (encountering new experiences or learning new things). Vygotsky (as cited in Liu & Ju, 2010), whose work is also widely seen as a foundational piece on constructivist theory in education, placed greater importance on the personal and social processes rather than individual aspects or make-up of the learner. Liu and Chen (2010) write:

From Vygotsky's perspective, learners construct meaning from reality but not passively receive what are taught in their learning environment. Therefore, constructivism means that learning involves constructing, creating, inventing, and developing one's own knowledge and meaning. The role of teacher is a facilitator who provides information and organizes activities for learners to discover their own learning. (p.65)

Though he, like Piaget agreed individual aspects were still a significant contributing factor in the overall experience of the learner, he believed the personal and social processes to be more important (Scholnik, Kol, & Abarbanel, 2006).

### **Constructivism and Online Education**

Constructivism, as applied to online educational settings and course design allows us to focus on the elements of the process which are likely to create opportunities for students to

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better understand course materials in relation to their experiences and in turn share those experiences with fellow classmates and the instructor. Unlike standard classroom endeavors, because online learning is in large part designed to be undertaken remotely, students are more likely to have assignments that require sharing their observations through posts, which are viewed by the entire class. This is uniquely different from standard classroom endeavors where this kind of sharing tends to be voluntary. For this reason, constructivism has become a popular topic among those discussing online course design and the benefits of these types of sharing related assignments (Gulati, 2004; Koohang, Riley, Smith, & Schreurs, 2009; McGee & Green, 2008). This is in large part because online settings require students to take responsibility for their learning, one of the primary tenets of constructivism (Gibbs, & Partlow, 2003; Gulati, 2004; Hamat & Embi, 2010). The literature in regards to course design and instructor training from a constructivist standpoint is rich in this area, a small sample of which will be presented here.

Carwile (2007) argues that in online courses “with a constructivist model, the learner is not a passive recipient but rather the center of instruction” (p. 68). She illustrates this through the use of message boards and emphasizes the opportunity an online environment presents for remote learners to “explore topics of their own choosing” (p. 70). She is also careful to note that while most in-class efforts can translate online, one must be prepared to spend more advanced time in course preparation to take advantages of these opportunities. Gold (2001) argues a constructivist approach in the development of adult learning networks, illustrating this through the emphasis Piaget’s (1964) concepts of assimilation, accommodation, equilibrium (the balance of understanding and reality) and disequilibrium (experiencing new information without personal

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experience). Using Piaget's (1964) concepts, Gold (2001) argues that each constructivist class should have the following three components:

1. Curriculum that has as its focus on experience-based problem solving.
2. Instruction that encourages students to interpret, analyze and predict information through the use of discussion boards.
3. Assessment that allows students to openly discuss and reflect on their experiences as well as the experiences of others. (pp. 40-47)

Swan, Garrison, and Richardson (2009) discuss the importance of online courses being seen as a community of learners and to a greater effect addressing that community from a constructivist approach:

What is less common is the collaborative construction of knowledge in a community of learners. This social construction of knowledge must be reasserted considering the fact that the traditional ideal in higher education has been discourse and reflection in a collaborative community of scholars. It is argued here that constructivist approaches and community are necessary for creating and confirming meaning and are essential for achieving effective critical thinking. Therefore, constructivist approaches and community must be necessary parts of higher education. In online higher education, building community is particularly important because it cannot be taken for granted, nor, for that matter, can inquiry. (p. 4)

Huang (2002) developed the following six tenets that constructivist-focused online course development should embrace:

1. Interactive learning

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2. Collaborative learning
3. Facilitating learning (creating a safe environment for learners to express themselves)
4. Authentic learning (providing real-world, case-based environments for meaningful learning)
5. Learner-centered learning (encouraging lifelong learning)
6. High quality learning or learning that involves high order thinking skills to learn how to determine the authenticity and quality of information. (pp. 32-24)

Critiques of constructivism to online settings usually focus on the difficulties of applying such a broad theory. Gulati (2004) notes that while almost all emerging online literature focuses on constructivist principles, “a closer examination of the emerging pedagogy reveals that the emerging collaborative online learning practices may be building on the traditional, normative, campus-based linear teaching experiences...” (p. 3). Thompson (2001) suggests a constructivist framework makes it difficult to settle on instructional objectives. Huang (2002) suggests the following seven challenges of constructivism for online course designers, instructors and learners including isolation, students determining the quality and authenticity of their learning, instructors awareness of physical distance and the challenges that presents for learners, instructors efforts to make course information easily relatable to real-life situations, instructors emphasis on the process of learning as well as the results, making teaching and learning student-centered and instilling collaborative learning methods by which social constructivism or community learning can occur.

Gold (2001) notes that while a constructivist approach to designing and teaching online courses is not without obvious merits, without proper training and experience,

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instructors, even the most ardent constructivists, may simply replicate classroom practices online. In the section on Student Centered Learning, I will discuss some of the implications of the student-focus and how this might directly apply to social presence.

### Systems Theory

Systems Theory (sometimes referred to in the literature as “System Dynamics”) was first developed by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1968) in 1936 and later revised in 1968 as General Systems Theory (GST) in the book *General Systems Theory: Foundations, Development and Applications*. Bertalanffy (Begley, 1999) developed GST out of concern regarding the scientific processes of the time, which he felt isolated phenomena for study irrespective of the environment in which they thrived. He argued for a universal, holistic theory which might be applicable across the sciences thus in turn potentially unifying scientific efforts and research:

“...there exist models, principles and laws that apply to generalized systems or their subclasses irrespective of their particular kind, the nature of their component elements, and the relations or forces between them. It seems legitimate to ask for a theory, not of systems of a more or less special kind, but of universal principles applying to systems in general.” (p. 32)

Bertalanffy identified several facets he felt were consistent with these systems. I have modified and condensed Begley’s (1999) chart illustrating each with working examples:

Goal	Rationale for online courses or programs. Desired university outcomes	Increased online enrollment, retention or just availability of courses or programs of study
Term	Definition as applied to online learning	Examples
Input	All efforts and materials necessary to create an online program or classes.	Information, money, energy, time, individual effort, & technology.



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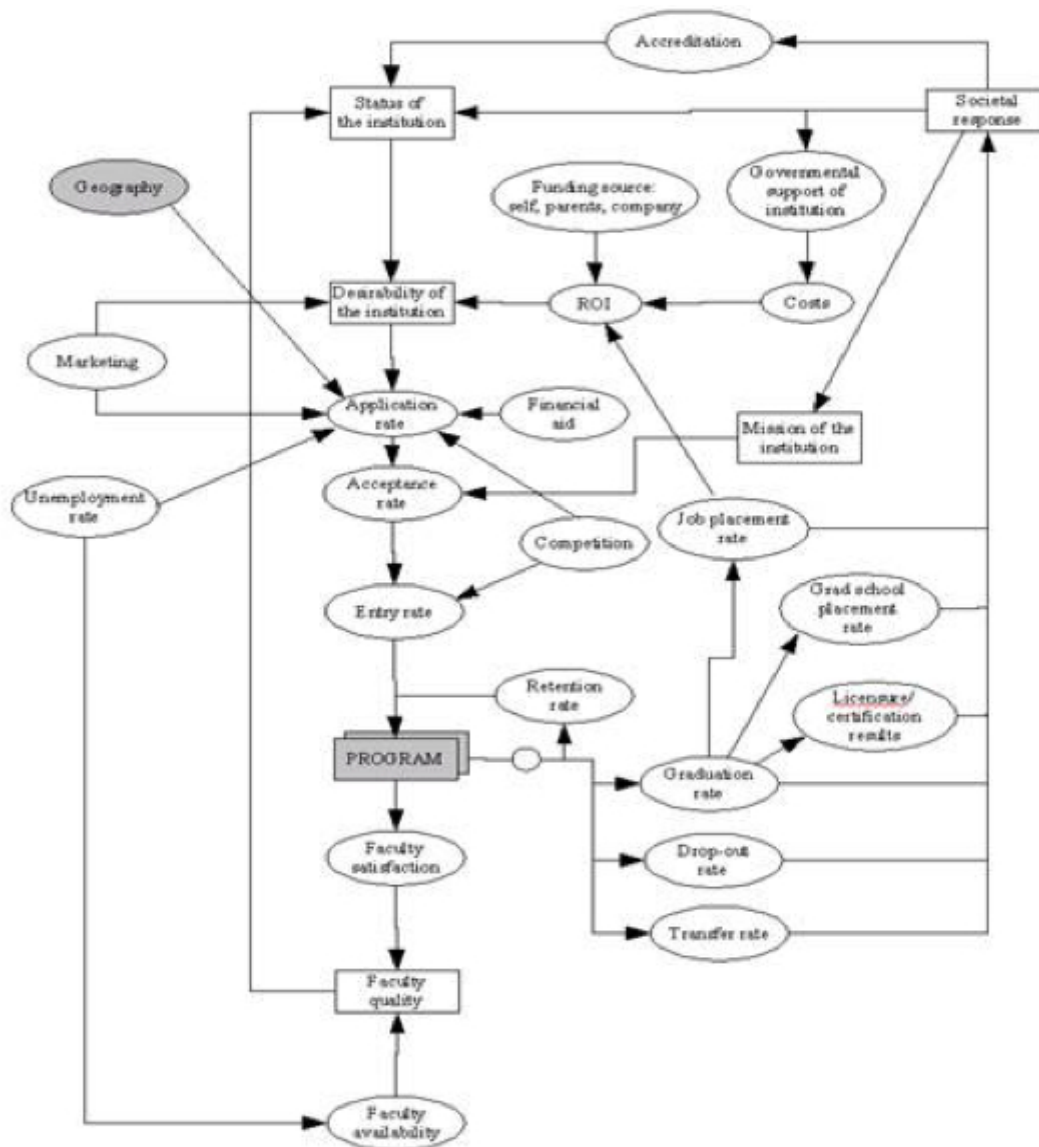
Throughput	The processes by which a school converts efforts and materials into actual online courses.	Thinking, planning, decision-making, meetings, sharing information.
Output	A school online program including instructors and university supports.	Online courses, trained faculty, trained faculty mentors, trained student mentors, delivery systems.
Feedback	Information gained from participation in the program (student, faculty and university-wide) that can be used to evaluate & monitor the system	Surveys From faculty (about the process, students etc.), student course surveys, student and faculty mentor observations.
Subsystem	Campus groups which exist as a part of a larger online program/goal.	Administration, faculty work groups (formal and informal), IT.
Dynamic system	The online program itself (courses, instructors, students and curriculum) changes the environment and is changed by the environment.	Curriculum, delivery methods and technology change as student and university needs change.
Boundary	Determination of the differences between the university and the outside world or inside systems that are distinct in some way. (Differing program goals, curriculum, students, etc.). Can be permeable or impassible.	Permeable: online courses that fit into all course or degree programs possibly as electives. Impassible: Obstacles to taking or completing online courses (technology, delivery methods, etc.)

(p. 2)

### **Systems Theory and Online Education**

The idea of “tagging” online education with a theory that explains the process and paints a clear picture of successful methods or outcomes is hardly a walk in the park. As an instructor in my 12<sup>th</sup> year of online education, including stints as an online curriculum developer and consultant, I have come to realize that online education is as easily complicated as in-class instruction. Certainly, anything that is tied to technology is bound to change and every class represents a variety of variables which change from moment to moment, day to day, semester to semester. Even the larger systems such as administrative bodies or policies are subject to widespread change at a moment’s notice. But as unpredictable and prone to change as online education can be, it still represents a system.

This idea of viewing online education from a systems perspective is not a new one. In regards to the creation and maintenance of SP, it is important to consider the role that each part of the system responsible for online learning plays and how that might affect instructors and students. Saba and Shearer (1994) empirically verify the concept of transactional distance (Moore’s 1980 theory of cognitive space between instructor and student), structure and dialogue. The authors found “systems dynamics modeling” a valuable tool for verifying theoretical concepts in distance education. Shaffer (2005) proposes the following model as a unified theory emphasizing system dynamics in a socioeconomic context:



(p. 6)

According to Shaffer (2005), what makes his model different from most is its emphasis on geography and lack of emphasis on characteristics typical of distance education. For a systems model to be applicable to a system as complicated as distance education, it must measure macro-environmental influences as is typical in-classroom settings such as face-to-face interaction. (p. 6). Potts and Hagan (2000) discuss the use of systems theory in the design, implementation and

evaluation of a social work course shared between three California State Universities (Long Beach, Chico and Humboldt). The authors apply their own experiences and those of the students in the course using standard systems terminology. The significant part of this article however, is the classification of student satisfaction as “throughput,” and the authors use of the feedback loop (student and faculty opinions regarding the course as well as the overall experience) as a means for improvement. Interestingly, the authors, similar to Shaffer (2005), also mention the significance of geography, in this case generalizability concerns with the uniqueness of a purely California based student-body. Moore and Kearsley (2012) provide a model ST model for distance education in which the university as a whole or “macro-system” supports the successful interaction of “sub-systems” including content, educational technology, the environment from which the course takes place or is administered, management and course design (p. 18).

### **Student-Centered Learning**

It is not hard to understand that students would have difficulties in an online environment after years of the typical classroom/school experience. Though our students tend to be more technologically advanced and certainly more up to date than we are as instructors, there seems to be a disconnect with online classes. It has been suggested that this is due to students’ preference for individually focused technologies such as Facebook and Twitter or one-to-one mediums such as email (Waldeck, Kearney & Plax, 2001). Though the idea that social networking sites can be helpful during the college experience has been discussed (Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2012; DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield & Fiore, 2012; Wechsler, Nelson, Lee, Seibring, Lewis, & Keeling, 2003) ultimately, as instructors we need to find a way to engage students so that the online course environment becomes as familiar or welcoming as the social networking sites they frequent. The main thing these sites have in common is the opportunity for personali-

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zation or individual expression which appears to be the reason most college age students prefer them. (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007).

There is no shortage of critics of personal technology and student use in regards to classroom applications as well as personal development in general. Sherry Turkle (2015) is an author of several books cautioning our reliance on technology and how that has resulted in the deterioration of interpersonal relationships publicly and at home. She writes

Life on our new digital landscape challenges us as citizens. Although the web provides incomparable tools to inform ourselves and mobilize for action, when we are faced with a social problem that troubles us, we are tempted to retreat to what I would call the online real. There we can choose to see only the people with whom we agree. And to share only the ideas our followers want to hear. (p. 293)

This includes a similar warning for the types of technology we choose to use which, which should be considered when we develop online courses. We tend to consider all of the “bells and whistles” when considering educational technologies, but I would argue the greater consideration is a better understanding of the students. Primarily, as we create online courses with the goal of creating presence or the types of value that traditional in-class experience brings such as community *through* being present, we need to focus on recreating online, opportunities for relationships. Turkle (2015) echoes this concern writing

There is nothing wrong with texting or email or videoconferencing. And there is everything right with making them technical better, more intuitive, easier to use. But no matter how good they get, they have an intrinsic limitation: People require eye contact for emotional stability and social fluency. ...Our slogan can be if a tool gets in the way of our

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looking at each other we should use it only when necessary. It shouldn't be the first thing we turn to" (pp. 324-325).

Schools are often at a financial disadvantage when it comes to acquiring technology, whereas many of our students often seem to have the newest, most up to date applications and hardware. Instructor perceptions regarding technology use is also a factor (Baylor & Ritchie, 2002; Ma, Andersson, & Streith, 2005; Vannatta, & Nancy, F. 2004).

So the primary question becomes how then might we develop online courses that embrace the best of the best while limiting the potential disadvantages that technology might introduce to the educational setting? While I advocate further exploration of social presence and suggest ways to incorporate this, the idea of student-centered learning (SCL) is also worth exploring as it, like social presence is student driven. SCL refers to the method by which students play an active role in the development of a course putting them in a role that was once reserved primarily for instructors. In focusing on student experience and the effort to combine curriculum and experience, SCL is built largely upon constructivist thinking and the early pragmatic movement of John Dewey (Hannafin & Land, 1997). Simply put, the idea is for an instructor to involve their students in the development of the course in regards to goals and exercises. As this idea goes against traditional educational processes, it has not been without its critics. Felder and Brent (1996) caution that though the results can be positive, they are "neither immediate nor automatic" and note that students used to traditional methods may have a hard time adjusting (p. 43).

It's fair to conclude that while traditional classroom students might have a difficult time with playing a new and larger role in the development and implementation of their classes, online students tend to be a little more independent than traditional students. This being said, there is support for SCL in online course development. Knowlton (2000) notes that while online

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instructors reject the idea of SLC due to “static” course content, unfamiliarity or newness to distance education and the feeling that distance education and thus technology dictate the need for instructor focused teaching (pp. 8-9), online learning is actually ideally suited to SCL if you take into account the differences between the two and the challenges that presents. He writes:

Socially, the problems of a teacher-centered classroom as a framework for the online course are heightened. In a traditional face-to-face course, students are aware of the large social dimension to learning. Even when a course is dominated by the professor, students are bombarded with visual and audible clues that there is a social dimension to the teaching and learning process--students are not “alone” in their efforts to learn. The experience is humanized through the senses. In the online classroom, many students feel a strong sense of dissonance because visual and audible clues are nonexistent. (p. 9)

Knowlton (2000) sees these challenges as an opportunity to design online courses so that the social classroom factors missing from an online course, are replaced with the same types of tools featured in SCL including collaboration, sharing of personal, life experiences in relations to the course as well as course-related experience.

Hutchins (2003), also notes the need for a shift in instructor roles, specifically in regards to faculty attitude, and immediacy in terms of behaviors as well as course design writing “...focusing research on instructor behavior rather than the technology employed will help address gaps concerning the teaching and learning process in web based classes...” (p. 7).

Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) also argue for the shift to SCL through the further development of online pedagogy which allows for online students to become more self-regulating than they would normally be required in the typical in-class setting.

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It is clear that online instruction requires a paradigmatic shift on the part of both instructors and learners in order to be successful. Changes in thinking and behavior don't often come easy however and the switch to on-line learning presents challenges to both instructors and students which necessitate a gradual rethinking of not only their respective roles, but the part those roles play in the larger online dynamic. While there are many things that are not yet clear, what we do know is that the online environment is different to both instructors and students. The challenge then is to do what we can to attempt to optimize the roles of both parties towards the traditional goals of learning and course outcomes. We, educators need to realize, however that this is happening in the *now* of any online course and as helpful as reflection can be, the more important piece is what can be done before or during an online class. I would argue that we need to see this as an evolving relationship no different than the dynamic of the typical, non-online classroom in which students and instructors work together and get to become familiar with each other in terms of the usual classroom evolution. I have presented here the challenges with the online environment for both instructors and students as well as the challenges technology brings. It occurs to me and is supported in the research that in the absence of the typical social dynamic of a physical classroom, traits such as immediacy consistently come up as an important part of the online experience as well as relationship and community-building factors. We need to remember that we are attempting to build a community in a setting where the members of that community are not actually physically together. In the absence of an actual physical setting, we must create the next best thing essentially manufacturing a community for the members of the class. This cannot be done without communication and collaboration towards that goal, something that few online courses or the technology that drives them are actually designed to do. Though not referring di-



rectly to online courses, Turkle (2015) also discusses this challenge in light of the dilemmas of a tech-laden world. She writes:

Now we have arrived at another moment of recognition. This time technology is implicated in an assault on empathy. We have learned that even a silent phone inhibits conversation that matters. The very sight of a phone on the landscape leaves us feeling less connected to each other, less invested in each other. Despite the seriousness of the moment, I write with optimism. Once aware, we can begin to rethink our practices. When we do, conversation is there to reclaim. For the failing connections of our digital world, it is the talking cure. (pp. 4-5)

The form of this communication, that should purposely be designed towards a collaboration that is both community building and course related should focus on not only social presence but particularly what social presence means to the participants (instructors *and* students) of an online course. In the next section I will make suggestions as to how this might take place so that a mutual understanding can be developed and implemented which takes into account the limitations and strengths of technology while also working to make sure that the essential elements of community that this collaboration brings forth are not lost through the duration of a course.

### **Social presence and “Other” student populations**

In considering our role as instructors in online settings and the pursuit of SP, more research needs to be done on the potential benefits for “other” student populations including disabled or at-risk students. I have mentioned my son who was my motivation for this research but an increased focus in this area could identify practices, processes or even specific disabilities that encounter greater success in online settings than traditional classroom settings. Accessibility and

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education including online courses has been a legal consideration since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (Bricout, 2001). Although accessibility tends to focus on those with documented disabilities, it may be a benefit for future research, particularly in SP to focus on accessibility in broader terms including those who general have difficulties with traditional classroom delivery. We may find that the broader population may benefit from attempts to create and maintain SP in ways we may not have considered.

Watson and Gemin (2008) speak to the potential of online courses in assisting the at-risk population (those missing units towards graduation due to failed or incomplete courses) in completing their high school diplomas. To this end, in their report they identify the following six goals of online “credit recovery” programs:

1. Help students make up credits to meet graduation requirements
2. Meet graduation deadlines
3. Prepare students for state exams
4. Get dropout students back in school
5. Provide educational equity for all students
6. Meet budgetary concerns while trying to serve all students

(p. 7)

They write:

Of course, the basic instructional strategies at the heart of these approaches to working with at-risk students pre-date online learning, and there have been successful credit recovery programs that connected with students in ways that don’t include involve computers. Unfortunately, however, these accomplished programs have been the exception rather than the rule, and clearly no successful and replicable model has yet emerged. Online

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learning holds the promise of creating new, innovative approaches, and online programs are already showing the way. (p. 16)

Students with disabilities are another population that online learning can potentially serve in ways traditional classroom settings might not. The potential for future research is rich in this area especially due to the myriad of technological advances, increase in the identification of disabilities that impact learning (mental and physical) and overall availability of technology.

Cooper (2006) notes that while all educators do not need to be experts on learning disabilities, with learning as the focus, they should embrace the potential for online delivery. He writes

“So often in accessibility considerations of educational websites or software the focus is on how best to make a particular element technically accessible to disabled students. However, the author maintains that educators need to stand back from these considerations and remember that, fundamentally, what we are seeking to make accessible is the learning. (p. 108)

Liccardi, et al (2007) notes the potential for SP to occur in social networking settings.

They write:

However, social networks do enable a different articulation of the self that allows a user to manage preconceptions. For example, a student who is a wheelchair user can control the disclosure of their disability online, deciding when, where, and if, their disability is relevant to a social network discussion. For some disabled students controlling disclosure in this way can facilitate social presence with potentially positive learning outcomes. (p. 7)

Roberts, Crittenden, & Crittenden (2011) speak to the need of acknowledging potential learning disabilities in online students and the role that plays in course design:

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Engaging in accessible course design is a proactive approach in which online courses are created taking into consideration the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities, from the initial stages of development to course completion. Conversely, making accommodations for students with disabilities in any course, whether it be online or not, occurs only after a student has disclosed his or her documented disability, which, in turn, means adjusting the design of the existing course and is more reactive in nature, leading to a design–redesign approach. (p. 243)

Seale and Cooper (2010) discuss accessibility and E-learning and the interplay between pedagogy and technology. They write:

If we accept that pedagogy and accessibility are related and that pedagogical issues will influence accessibility in both simple and complex ways, this has implications for the practice of teachers. If pedagogy and accessibility are separate, then it might be assumed that teachers have limited or no responsibility for accessibility and that responsibility can be placed on technologists and technicians, leaving teaching practice unchanged. But if pedagogy and accessibility are integral to one another then a teacher must have some responsibility for and understanding of accessibility. Just as technologists and technicians look to technical tools to help them develop their accessibility practices, we might expect teachers to look to pedagogical tools to help develop their accessibility practices. In other words the different contexts that different stakeholders are working in may require different tools to assist in the development of accessible e-learning. (p. 1110)

In regards to the role of pedagogy and accessibility, the authors feel that a focus on pedagogy could perform the following three functions towards accessibility:

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1. Raise awareness amongst teachers that there is an association between accessibility and pedagogy and scope the nature of that association.
2. Provide teachers access to knowledge about effective e-learning, including facilitators and barriers to effective e-learning, thereby addressing the “why?” aspects of accessibility.
3. Provide teachers with methods and approaches for applying knowledge about effective e-learning to the development of accessible eLearning materials and activities, thereby addressing the “how?” aspects of accessibility. (p. 1110)

The authors conclude by emphasizing the relationship between pedagogy and technology in the creation of courses that are accessible writing:

Finally, by arguing that teachers might be assisted in developing accessible e-learning through the blended use of specialist accessibility tools and generic pedagogy tools; we are not suggesting that tools on their own offer a solution for the observed relative inaccessibility of elearning in higher and further education. We are suggesting however that the right combination of tools have the potential to help teachers acknowledge that accessibility is just as much an important pedagogical issue as it is a technical one. (p. 1115)

Fichten, et al. (2009) surveyed 233 disabled students, 28 professors, 58 disability service provider, and 33 eLearning specialists at a series of colleges throughout Canada and found the most commonly cited response to eLearning difficulties for each of the four parties or “stakeholders” was “unresolved”. They conclude that “It is the charge to all postsecondary stakeholders to ensure that e-learning technologies continue to benefit rather than hamper students with all types of disabilities and that accessibility gains are maintained and built upon.”(p. 254)

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The authors recommend that universities adopt three main guidelines as they endeavor to develop accessible online courses:

1. Training: “Developing a module, as a start, on how to make e-learning accessible, and integrating this into existing training, would, at a minimum, begin sensitizing faculty and staff on the issues. Other, more targeted sessions can be considered on specific topics, such as how to make a website or PDF file accessible, based on needs.” (p. 253)
2. Adopt eLearning Accessibility Guidelines: “Like training, having such guidelines in place would help resolve problems with inaccessible websites and other elearning tools and materials, and would inform those making purchasing decisions about the need to select the most accessible product. Of course, it goes without saying that the strength of such guidelines would be based on the commitment demonstrated by those who lead and/or champion e-learning on campus. (p. 253)
3. Proactively Engage On-campus Accessibility Experts: “In the case of end-user testing, actively seek out and invite students with different disabilities to participate in such activities. Who better to identify possible accessibility issues than the users themselves?” (p. 253)

### **CHAPTER THREE: IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PRESENCE**

While it can be argued that self-identity and self-categorization are important aspects of SP and that constructivism and student-centered learning offer equally important considerations, the more difficult issue becomes how to incorporate these theories in the design and implementation of online courses. While there are no perfect solutions, it seems that a most direct way is to involve the students themselves in the ongoing process. Online courses are an organic undertaking in much the same ways traditional courses are. As we attempt to better understand the online classroom space the students are learning in, we educators, are more likely to discover new and richer ways in which we can foster the experience of SP. The technologies we use will change and each generation seems to bring new challenges that necessitate changes in the ways we teach. From my experience, as I consider the process of online instruction, it is clear that I view students as the catalyst for change and improvement. Though the teacher plays an important role, it is less likely that instructors will stay abreast of technology-mediated forms of social engagements than will students. This being the case, the choice to emphasize students in the implementation of SP seems to be a reasonable one. Though it is an oversimplification to say the research has shown that students crave belongingness and an individual and group identity, it is hard to argue against their contribution to engaged presence in online learning. There is no universally held method for fostering SP, which I believe is a good thing as it forces instructors to recognize the individual meaning of SP to students as well as the differences each student may feel in the online space. Lowenthal (2009) suggests that this is in part due to variety of different definitions and models we have for SP stating, “The differences in how researchers define social presence might seem minor but they end up having significant consequences on how people conceptualize social presence” (p. 131). Lowenthal(2009) calls for a new, multidimensional instru-

ment that evaluates individual behaviors rather than global effects and sees the development of such a tool as part of the next wave of research in which “it is likely that researchers will begin to employ multiple and mixed methods approaches of studying social presence that focus on, among other things, the socially situated contextual nature of social presence” (p. 133). Reno (2005) also supports the effort to reevaluate and redesign the ways we envision the student experience and SP, advocating for a constructionist approach emphasizing user interactions and the human experience in mediated space:

This approach seems like a promising line of research as the interest shifts from virtual to mixed environments, where the experience of the virtual place is less the experience of a wired, artificial reality and becomes more intertwined with our ordinary experience. (p. 193)

### **Student Participation**

At present, SP is currently treated largely as a phenomenon that either occurs or does not. Though there are several definitions and measures of SP, what I conclude is that the perception of SP is informed by a subjective experience. This being the case, it makes sense in efforts to create SP in online courses to involve the students in both the determination of the factors that are equated with SP as well as fostering SP in online settings. The hypothesis I present here is that students engaged with assessing the viability and application of SP in their online learning spaces, will result in enhancing SP and the potential of SP in the role of developing and implementing online courses.

### **Implementing Social Presence: Considering the Student Space**

For many college students, the online space is a relatively new form of curriculum delivery. Though recent research shows that more students are taking online courses, for most it is



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still not what they view as the traditional classroom experience. Over the years I have discovered that the newness of anything in class can be unnerving unless I offer support and a rationale. Getting student buy-in can be difficult without that support but certainly not impossible. Having written and taught online courses for over 15 years I have found that students participation in the development and ongoing direction of my online classes to be integral in allowing my students to feel empowered and less fearful. The common strength of each of the theories I have discussed-- Social Identification and Categorization Theories, Constructivism and Student-Centered Curriculum-- is that they all provide an opportunity for student involvement (and thus social expression) and consider the role of the student as an active learner. This would also seem to necessitate a better understanding of the ways students view themselves as being present online in instructional settings. Though there appears to be a shortage of actual students' definitions of presence, there are observations of the ways in which presence was created. Rather than go into depth here, I will briefly focus on some of the research that seems to be consistent with my goal of developing a student-focused definition. Book (2004) states 6 facets of virtual experience including shared space, graphical user interface (a 3-D picture of the place you are in or at), immediacy (participation with others), interactivity with the environment and others, persistence (that the site or activity will exist regardless of your participation, and socialization/community (the idea of working together for something better or improved). McKerlich, Riis, Anderson, & Eastman (2011) identified three main categories present in virtual, synchronous learning events including social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Lee and Huang (2018), found that increased time and opportunities for interaction resulted in higher levels of SP and group cohesion. Schubert, Friedmann & Regenbrecht (2001) identified three dimensions of presence: spatial presence, involvement and realness. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) notes that the constraints of a

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typical learning management systems can tend to “force” presence but that newer and typically non-instructional technologies like Twitter can offer opportunities for students to participate in and feel presence.

The lack of research on actual student definitions underscores the need for them to develop their own. It appears that a consistent theme to the ways in which students experience SP is as an active participant in a group setting in which others are present and active. Since social presence is a student perception, it makes perfect sense that they should be the ones who facilitate and thus determine how that occurs. This could take place as an activity early on. In most of the online courses I teach, I have students perform some sort of introductory exercise in the very beginning of the course to encourage community and allow all of the students to get to know their classmates in the absence of an actual, physical space. Part of that introductory process could be the discussion of social presence but more particularly, what it means and how it is manifest for them. I envision this to take place by providing a brief definition of social presence (to be chosen by the instructor) and having the students, as part of their personal introduction reflect on that definition and how they feel they might experience it as part of the ongoing flow of the class. This is an important first step because it is very likely that students, especially those unfamiliar with online learning, may not know what social presence is or how it might relate to their online learning experience. To this end, instructors can become a valuable resource to the students while also have the chance to shape the community of their online classrooms. Tu and McIsaac (2002) recommend instructors assume a training role in regards to the creation of SP in classes due to, among other things, the lack of a clear definition of presence and differences in how SP is perceived by students. Akyol and Garrison (2008) recommend a better understanding of the “de-

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velopmental progression of the presences” in order to “optimally integrate these elements in creating and sustaining a collaborative community of inquiry” (p. 18).

I understand that every course is different and that many online students simply want to complete their courses with little fanfare, but I also feel that having students participate in this manner will allow for several valuable things to take place for both instructors and students. Firstly, it will provide the students an introduction to social presence which they may not have considered when initially considering an online course. This is important in that this opportunity for involvement, even briefly at the beginning of the semester, will help make students more aware of their involvement and responsibility for the larger fabric of the course particularly to the learning community. For the instructor, they can see early on what students see as their experience of social presence and even whether it is a significant factor to them in taking the course. From my experience, while many students do show some level of concern for the development and maintenance of the learning community, many are also happy to just complete the course and move on. Regardless of individual student motivations, this is an opportunity for the instructor to see going forward what the initial need of the students may be. This exercise also signals to the student that they play a larger role in the course than simply that of a casual participant as well as providing a self-regulating role. For example, if a student responds that consistent participation and feedback from fellow students is a personal factor in the perception of social presence, they may also realize that they too have the responsibility to do the same for their classmates. It is also entirely likely that students may all have different perceptions of social presence and how they might experience it, in which case an instructor may be faced with the daunting task of finding one or more common threads to implement. Even this can be a positive outcome though as it allows an instructor the opportunity to know early on what students are

thinking about in regards to the online community as well as starting the process of students thinking about the process itself, their potential role and the responsibility they have in creating a learning community.

The majority of student-focused research on SP focuses mostly on perception of SP and the perceived value towards the merits or values of the online course. Though there is very little research on student participation in the development of SP, as it comes from the students it makes sense that the students would help us determine and implement it.

### **Implementing Social Presence: Considering the Faculty Space**

Though online education at the college level continues to grow, the faculty role in the research is still largely focused on the “how to” aspect. In considering the faculty space towards changing the role, as I envision it, to one of creating and implementing SP, it makes sense to take a brief look at faculty impressions of the online experience. For the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the faculty experience, a brief sample of the literature on both negative and positive impressions of teaching online will be presented here.

Faculty satisfaction teaching online has been examined from a number of perspectives including institution type and experience (Windes & Lesht, 2014), beliefs and preferred supports (McGee, Windes, & Torres, 2017), course review processes (Yowe, 2016), perceived institutional support (Thompson, 2017) and personalized, professional development through self-assessment (Rhode, Richter, & Miller, 2017) to name a few. Lorenzo and Moore (2002) considers faculty satisfaction as one of their five pillars of quality along with student satisfaction, learning effectiveness, access, and institutional financial implications. Fish and Gill (2009) note that changes in technology, availability of online course offerings and the potential of increased student populations often necessitate the creation and implementation of online courses but that in-

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structors can often view new technologies as stress-inducing. For instructors to have a comfort level with delivery methods, adequate training is of high levels of concern. One of the main contributors to comfort level for most online instructors is previous experience teaching online. The authors are clear in their view on the value of faculty in the online space, writing: “Faculty is perhaps the single greatest resource of any university. Faculty support for any new initiative such as online learning is critical to its success” (p. 58). Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) Identified factors than can influence faculty satisfaction teaching online creating three main categories:

1. Student-related: greater access to differing student populations and potential for greater interaction
2. Instructor-related: contributing to positive student outcomes, having an interest in technology, and perceived challenge of teaching online amongst other things.
3. Institution-related: “Faculty satisfaction is generally high when the institution values online teaching and has policies in place that support the faculty. Workload issues are the greatest barrier in the adoption of online education because educators perceive the workload to be higher than compared to that of traditional courses. At least initially, faculty expect to spend more time on online course development and online teaching (p. 106). McGee, Windes and Torres (2017) examined perceptions of online teachers in regards to institutional support and identified 11 guidelines they believed best supported their needs in developing appropriate expertise to teach online:
  1. Assistance from an instructional designer to help with course designs or re-design of a classroom course
  2. Self, peer, staff or student review of course to catch areas that may be lacking or confusing before the course is offered
  3. Training that models the best practices you are expected to adopt

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4. Online course rubric or other strategy is provided to illustrate expectations
  5. Training sessions that focus on meeting the requirements of a course rubric (such as Quality Matters) to facilitate understanding of the best practices embedded in rubric
  6. Help desk and instructional technology support staff for faculty in need help
  7. Teaching online is recognized, encouraged, and rewarded at your institution
  8. Skill-based training (for example, facilitating discussions, providing timely and helpful feedback, and the like) that is aligned with good practices
  9. Discussions, community of practice, or other venues for sharing and consulting with colleagues
  10. Completion of an online teaching certificate
  11. Prolonged experience, such as teaching online for a specific amount of time or a certain number of courses (Table 4, p. 344)
- The authors conclude by posing three questions for institutions to use to reflect on the amount of support they offer faculty:
- What kinds of just-in-time supports are available to the online instructor?
  - How are faculty members recognized about their accomplishments, persistence, and achievements related to online teaching?
  - In what ways are faculty supports designed or configured to address a range of expertise from novice to expert? (p. 344)

Allen and Seaman (2011) report that while online learning has increased steadily at the college level, even faculty at the institutions with the most positive impression of online learning have yet to fully accept it as a method of instruction. They believe this is due in large part to the efforts of the university to develop online programs:

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The perceived acceptance rate by faculty varies widely between colleges and universities with online offerings and those without such offerings. Over one-quarter of chief academic officers at institutions with no online offerings report their faculty do not accept its value; which is, perhaps a self-fulfilling prophecy. Institutions that offer only online courses and those that offer both online course and full online programs report that only seven percent do not fully accept online education. ...While the acceptance at institutions that are more engaged in online is greater than at other institutions, There remains a level of concern among all academic leaders about the full acceptance of online instruction by their faculty. (pp. 17-18)

There are a variety of concerns for online faculty which seem to contribute to the perceived lack of legitimacy. Allen and Seaman (2013) report student preparedness and discipline required for online instruction is a growing concern among colleges. In their annual report on the state of online teaching in the U.S. they write:

One additional area of concern for academic leaders is their belief that online learning may not be appropriate for all students. In 2007 just over 80% reported “Students need more discipline to succeed in online courses” as an *important* or *very important* barrier to the widespread adoption of online education. Experience with online education has only strengthened this view-the proportion of academic leaders who reported “Students need more discipline to succeed in online courses” as *Important* or *Very Important* has increased to 88.8 percent for 2012. The pattern of agreement has changed over time with much larger numbers of

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public and private nonprofit institutions now agreeing online students need more discipline to succeed. (p. 29)

The additional effort or perceived effort required to teach online also seems to be an issue for faculty. Hislop & Ellis (2004) write

One key aspect of online education is instructor time. Significant changes in faculty time to deliver an online course can have substantial impact on the cost required to deliver the course as well as impacting faculty members' incentive to develop and teach online courses. There appears to be a general opinion among faculty today that online courses require more time to teach than traditional face-to-face courses. (p. 16)

Dibiase (2000) also states that faculty tend to believe that online instruction requires more time than face-to-face instruction based on recollections but found that this was not the case when examining three year records of faculty efforts (Diabase, 2004). Though Dibiase's study showed that faculty did not actually spend more time online, it's interesting to consider that many assumed they would. I believe these types of issues or findings are important not just in that they help us understand perceptions or biases of teaching online, but that they help us to consider how faculty actually feel about teaching online.

### **The Shift from global to individual**

Amongst the differences an instructor encounters while teaching an online class is the change from a global, class-focused experience to an individually-focused student-teacher experience. This might not seem like much of a change but essentially we are asking our instructors to see classroom pedagogy in a completely different light, one in which classroom engagement shifts from a "one size fits all" to working with students on a far more individual basis. To com-



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pare the two, the online environment would be like an instructor giving a lecture to a group and then availing themselves for questions or clarification to each student in the room. In this sense instruction becomes much more like actual advising and less like lecturing. This can be a difficult adjustment for an instructor to make on-the-fly which is often the reality of teaching an online course for the first time. The issue, I believe can be resolved through carefully designed training, of which understanding and implementing SP would be an important part. The process of implementing SP as I will discuss in the following section requires that instructors check in with their students in a way that is more typical of an online setting and not always present in a classroom setting. Our classrooms are often large, a necessity often driven by economics at the college setting which often necessitates a lecture-hall type of classroom design making it difficult to check in with students. Many instructors have taught this way for a good portion of their careers and even some of the online programs currently in use favor larger student-to-teacher ratios due to the logistical concerns of fitting large groups of students into classrooms. This is a common mistake of most online programs but the rise of online education was due in large part to the economic benefits for typical brick and mortar institutions that saw a way to increase enrollments without increasing the actual size of their campuses. Many online instructors have not felt supported by their prospective colleges in making the change, something that has hindered the development of online courses that are both on par with the classroom experience for instructors and students and a viable option for those who would prefer the online setting. If we look at the process by which we hire and train our instructors as well as the process by which we hope to recruit and retain our students it is easy to see the disconnect, or philosophical incongruity of the online setting. At the small liberal arts college where I currently teach, we like many similar colleges emphasize a “high-touch” environment for our students. The process begins with recruit-

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ing visits where we show our students the campus and they meet many of the people who may be involved with their education. As a department chair, I even lead weekend sessions for parents and students that speak about the opportunities available to them should they choose our college. I even sit on a “parent’s panel” where parents, on recruiting visits, can ask me questions most of which are on how we help their students succeed. This process probably sounds familiar but if you look at every step, you see the opposite of what occurs in an online class.

In an online class, especially asynchronous designs, students may never even see or meet their instructor. It is entirely realistic that they could take a full slate of classes sitting alone in front of a computer screen. The difference in the two is important to note because it speaks to the challenge of teaching online and the process we need to undertake as we develop online courses. Online courses, in many cases are completely different from what most colleges want to represent themselves as with the exception of those few purely online institutions. But what do we think about when we think about college? As instructors or students few of us would imagine ourselves sitting alone in front of a computer. I would argue that as we shape our online classes, we need to remember what the perception of the college experience is, particularly classroom settings and start from there. Taking a course online will never be the same as taking the typical college course that most envision, but that’s not a bad thing nor does it have to be and either-or proposition. If we consider our instructors and students as we develop online courses and programs, I believe we can strategically design course offerings that can effectively augment the existing strengths of a college or university. It’s important that the development of online classes play to the strengths of a university so that they become a part of what already works, whether that be a “high-touch” approach or simply presenting students with a choice of class type (online or in-class). I often ask my freshmen how they found out about my college and

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most tell me they found us online using their phone. We tend to recruit with visual messages whether it is online or through brochures. Again, we see the disconnect. What is the visual image for a millennial that would inspire them to take a course online?

### **Looking Back: Dominican University of California Online Pilot 2011**

In 2011 I received a university grant to create and implement an online pilot which I led at the request of the university president and vice president (a PowerPoint presentation summarizing that effort at the one year mark can be found in index A). In regards to our prospects for success, we were probably, philosophically and structurally, the least likely candidate for success in this area. We are a small, private Catholic Heritage, liberal arts college (generally 2000-2200 students) that was initially an all-women's college at the turn of the century. We have always been a small college with growth challenges, one of them being the price of real estate in the San Francisco Bay Area, making it difficult for students to afford off-campus housing and limited dormitory space for those who can't. We are also challenged in regards to increasing our current facilities due to the fact we are located in an exclusive neighborhood where housing can usually cost in the neighborhood of one-million dollars. Building in Marin County, where we are located, is also carefully regulated and permits for fairly simple expansions can cost in the thousands. Even our grounds are closely regulated by the county.

With all of these obvious challenges, the idea of creating an online program became popular, if not necessary for future growth. Though there were some faculty that taught hybrid versions of their classes (three, all in the School of Education) we only had one asynchronous online course which was an advanced writing and research course. Like most small liberal arts colleges, we had long prided and promoted ourselves based on our small student-faculty ratio (ten to one at the time) which was probably our primary selling point and easily our primary identity at

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that point. The faculty had little to no experience teaching online and since most had been with the university for several years, were very aware that the idea was essentially counter to everything we were at the time and had been since our inception in the early 1900's. Initially an outside company was hired as part of an aggressive plan for growth but that launch failed for several reasons. Our president at the time, knowing that this was my area of research asked the vice president at the time to work with me to create and implement an online pilot with the hopes of growing in this area. I was allowed to develop our pilot based on my research and as part of that developed the following plan and requirements:

1. We would begin with what I refer to as "seeding" essentially identifying firstly a small number of classes to begin with that could potentially be taught with SP to best reflect the classroom experience our students were accustomed to.
2. Classes chosen would be advantageous to the students to take in an online format (either due to logistical issues like demand and space).
3. Classes chosen would be classes that could be taught online with close to the same qualities as a regular classroom setting.
4. Teachers for these classes were chosen because they wanted to teach online and not mandated to do so.
5. Each teacher would receive a stipend for developing their classes as well as the opportunity to attend at least one conference on online learning of their choice as well as one paid subscription or access to an online learning journal of their choice.
6. Teachers undergo a two-day training with me primarily on SP and how to incorporate SP into their classes which also included time for them to identify the areas of difficulty students might

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encounter switching to the online format. (the PowerPoint used for this training is presented in Appendix B)

7. Faculty mentors with previous online teaching experience be hired for the new faculty to consult with.
8. A student mentor with previous online learning experience be appointed for the students to consult if needed.

After a semester of planning and training, we began with 11 classes all taught in the spring semester of 2012: two biology courses, one nursing course, two sustainability courses, one philosophy course, two communication courses, one occupational therapy course, one religion course and one political science course. Most of the courses were taught in a limited hybrid format (fewer meetings than the traditional hybrid format but with some actual classroom time usually for exams) while several were purely asynchronous including my own.

### **Results**

At the conclusion of the pilot, the faculty met to discuss their experiences. In regards to the students, initially, we encountered some of the same difficulties highlighted in the research. Students were not prepared for the sudden shift in mediums, and required a good deal of initial assistance to access and complete their coursework. Once past the initial difficulties however, students seemed to settle in. During these initial difficulties, faculty reported that their efforts towards SP, specifically reaching out and encouraging students were especially important and helped shape the overall environment of the course, making it seem like a less uncomfortable transition. Some also reported that their efforts towards SP, seemed to help replace the absence of classroom dynamics. The majority of the faculty, however did not feel as if their online courses offered the same quality as their traditional classes. Several reported feeling disconnected and

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“out of control” while others noted that they felt uncomfortable not seeing their students regularly and often worried when a student was late to post or missed posts. Of the faculty that did feel their online course matched their traditional classrooms, many were surprised by the rate and quality of their student’s participation online and were surprised at how quickly the students adapted to the online environment. These same faculty also reported the need to work towards SP in the initial stages of the course, but less as the course progressed.

Overall, faculty believed their efforts towards SP benefitted the class and helped them feel more comfortable as well. Specifically, reaching out and regular check-ins helped ease their initial fears and made them more comfortable in the absence of a traditional classroom setting. Many reported feeling isolated and uncomfortable at first, but most agreed they settled in once the students appeared to understand the flow of the class and requirements necessary of the online format. Most felt they improved over the course of the semester and found that once they had established a regular, weekly routine and better understood the needs of their students, they began to feel more comfortable with the online environment. Most felt they would like to continue teaching online while only a small group felt their classes and teaching style did not lend itself to future online efforts.

### **Defining Success**

This brings up an important question: how do we define success? For all practical intents and purposes our pilot was a success. We initiated the process, achieved growth with limited resources, discovered the potential difficulties with the online format for our particular student and faculty population, developed a variety of solutions for those challenges, were able to implement and better understand the ways in which SP could help our students, and set ourselves up to continue to expand. Since 2011, we have increased the number of online courses we offer. Our

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summer online course offerings (hybrid and asynchronous) have grown and we regularly offer 15-20 classes every summer. During the regular semester however, we tend to offer fewer online courses than the summer, usually 10-15 in total; a much smaller number proportionate to the overall number of courses offered in the regular semester. This is still more than we had offered online prior to the pilot.

But I think that if we just define success in terms of growth, we will miss the big picture or the true potential of online classes taught with social presence and the student populations they have the potential to help. When we consider the history and development of online learning, it seems that the largest spikes in growth were always those whose cause was the need for individually based programs. Initially it was for working adults who needed to complete a degree. Though we now consider various audiences when considering the design and implementation of an online program, one thing is clear, we always consider the population we are trying to reach.

For some schools this is the result of research they have which indicates a large population that needs an educational benefit best served through online instruction. Regardless, there is a history and experience in place designing courses to fit the individual. For my son, online learning is the only way he can learn because his medical conditions have left him a purely visual learner. But what about other populations with a similar or even different condition? Can online learning be the best method for them as well? I argue here that success should be seen as delivering a method of education to those who would have not had that opportunity had it not been online. Though we tend to focus on geographic distinctions (those who can't make it to campus for any myriad of reasons) we ought to be broadening our focus to other areas such as learning disabilities or even social anxieties. Success has long been defined through numbers

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when it really should be defined on a student-per-student basis. Unfortunately, this isn't how the typical college is designed and I think that is why we tend to lose the big picture. All colleges have some sort of admission programs because attendance and survival are intricately interwoven into the fabric of survival. Though I understand the necessity for growth, I think that more research is needed on populations served and less on overall numbers. Online learning has the potential to reach any number of populations and success should be redefined in terms of the needs of those populations. A needs-based approach could help us identify other exiting populations that might otherwise be lost without the opportunity. For those concerned with numbers, the logic here is simple; there are potentially more populations that could be best served online which means more students. It can be a win-win game but there needs to be a greater focus on these different populations for this to happen on a "college-based scale".



## **CHAPTER FOUR: STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PRESENCE: THE PROCESS**

Ideally, the maintenance of SP would become student generated and maintained and thus largely organic. There are many studies that mention the benefits of SP to students in online courses, but few regarding actual ownership of the process specifically defining, implementing and maintaining SP. But since it is safest to assume **our** students have little online experience, it is best to assume they will need a starting point from which SP will become “theirs”. Since SP is a phenomenon we hope they experience, it really should be designed in such a way that they assume ownership at some point, much like or as a result of a self-generating feedback system. Since most courses begin with some sort of student introduction, this would be an optimal place to engage students and briefly explain the concept of SP. I envision that students, along with their introductions could be introduced to the concept and then asked how SP might manifest itself for them in that course. It is important to start with a definition of SP as students through their technological experiences to date may have different feelings of being present online. (Tu, 2001). Though immediacy behaviors on the part of the instructor is often cited as a source of SP, Russo and Benson (2005) note that the immediacy behaviors of fellow classmates are just as important. Newberry (2001) recommends that instructors become familiar with both off-line and online interpersonal behaviors on of students. Although the majority of the research tend to focus on instructor actions in implementing and maintaining SP, I am proposing that students take a greater responsibility in the creation, implementation and sustaining of SP.

The process I envision for a purely asynchronous course is as follows:

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Step 1: During the first week online, students are asked to introduce themselves, review a brief definition and explanation of presence and comment on what they think would make them feel present during the course. The instructors post might look something like this:

Welcome to (course title and number). For this week please introduce yourself to the class and answer a question on social presence and your role in the course. The term social presence refers to your perception that you are part of a community even though you will be participating online instead of in a physical classroom. Though there are many definitions of social presence, here is a pretty straightforward one: "ability of participants in a Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999, p. 89). After you introduce yourself, answer the following questions:

1. As an online learner, what aspect of an online class do you feel would make you feel present or a contributing part of an active learning community?
2. How do you feel you might contribute to the other members of the class (students and instructor) to the presence they hope to feel?
3. How do you plan on contributing to the social presence throughout the course?

This process will help with several facets. Firstly, it allows the students a brief look at the concept of social presence and provides them with a working definition. I have chosen the definition in that it is broad enough to fit into a variety of classes and leaves room for personal interpretation. This is important because I want the students to personalize the definition as part of the larger process in which they begin to conceive of the concept and how it might relate to them as participants of the course. Secondly it underscores the students' responsibility to the class and the instructor in maintaining presence for more than just themselves. This may prove

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to work towards the self-regulating opportunity I spoke of earlier where students play an important role in maintaining presence for themselves as well as the class as a whole. Thirdly, this initial exercise will allow for the instructor to get a precursory look at how the students view presence and what can be potentially done through exercises, assignments or even additional applications or software to maintain that throughout the course. Fourth, depending on the type of course being taught, this will allow the instructor to compare the student definitions and perceptions of SP with the actual course content. All courses are different and instructors teach them based on a variety of facets including personal style/method and course outcomes and goals. It cannot be understated that not all instructors or students will be interested in SP or anything beyond simply completing the course.

Finally though students tend to be proficient online, this does not mean they are prepared to take an online course. Song, Singleton, Hill and Koh (2004) note the need for students to develop time management strategies while Vonderwell (2003) notes that students need to be taught collaboration skills. Yang and Cornelious (2005) note that not all students are prepared for online learning and recommend that the learning styles of students be understood before taking online courses and that online orientations be included. Similarly instructors also need to be prepared to teach online. Yang and Cornelious (2005) note that proper recruitment and training of online faculty are important considerations in the development of distance education programs and recommend mentors for faculty whenever possible. Vonderwell (2003) notes that instructors need to understand group processes as well as strategies for effective communication.

The level of self-motivation required tends to be greater and there can be a tendency for students to do as little as possible or just what is required of them. SP, however requires that students go beyond the basic requirements of a course and participate in a larger community-

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focused conversation. For SP to occur, a community has to be created and maintained which is often in addition to assignments and projects. There is no guarantee that students will be interested in the amount of work required in developing and maintaining the ongoing dialogue with a group of classmates they may never see or even meet. Having students participate in the development of SP and thus the community maintenance might encourage them to participate more or even discover that an online class can be more than a requirement but actually an additional chance to forge community in the same ways they may participate in social networking activities. Hopefully, they will see their participation in developing SP in the online classes they take as an activity similar to the ones they use to develop and maintain their social networking activities. Though the two are very different, giving students an opportunity to engage their classmates in a similar albeit curriculum-focused manner, may be the step that connects the two in the minds of students or at least allows for similarities between the two to be established in their minds. This may also allow for instructors to see the different ways in which SP is manifest in the minds of their students. The research on the value of SP is compelling and speaks to the many ways in which online courses can be enhanced, and by viewing this as a process and not a phenomenon, each class can be an opportunity for instructors to see the ways in which SP may be different for everyone or how SP changes over time. As instructors, we tend to repeat what works until it doesn't but that realization can often come after a class is complete. Checking in at the beginning of the semester will give instructors the opportunity to sense whether or not anything has changed in regards to SP and potentially modify what has worked in the past should the need present itself. Ultimately this type of assessment can be invaluable for any course but can be even more valuable in an online setting where our students are not physically present.

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It is understandable that there is likely still a level of unfamiliarity and inexperience regarding online education for both instructors and students. For this reason it is suggested here that universities undertaking online education provide mentors for both students as well as instructors. This is also important in establishing or laying the groundwork for SP. The advantages of mentoring and training of online faculty is supported in the research (Wolf, 2006; Marek, 2009; Thompson, 2006; & Lane, 2013) as is providing similar support for students, especially peer mentors (Beldarrain, 2006; Kim & Bonk, 2006; McKenzie, Ozkan & Layton, 2006; Gunawardena, Ortegado-Layne, Carabajal, Frechette et al., 2006).

As part of our pilot at Dominican University, I trained a group of faculty and students to serve as mentors. As we progressed from offering one online course during the summer to our current rate of 17-20, the faculty and students mentors still continue to be sought out for advice. The faculty mentors are usually helping faculty with planning and implementing their online courses, while the student mentors are usually seeking information regarding site navigation. Though we yet to conclude our research, it appears that there is a need for mentors for both students and faculty. A significant part of the faculty training focused on creating and maintaining SP. Of the faculty who attended, several have continued teaching online and continue to receive positive feedback from students. This type of approach would also lend itself to potentially establishing and maintaining SP as well.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: FACULTY ROLES IN IMPLEMENTING AND MAINTAINING SOCIAL PRESENCE**

As SP is a result of faculty and student interaction, creating and maintaining SP will fall in large part on the shoulders of instructors. “The most effective way to build teaching presence within the online environment is to be proactive rather than reactive. Without the in-person orientation and connections of the traditional classroom, miscommunications and missed opportunities for learning can be amplified in the online environment” (Budhai & Williams, 2016). As any classroom without actual, in-class interaction can quickly go off-track, online classrooms are at an even greater risk. In online classrooms the onus of direction is far more a focus on instructor actions and SP is no different. After initiating the process with a self-introductory assignment, instructors then need to play the role of facilitator in regards to SP or, as Radovan and Kristl (2017) write “The teacher, in this context, plays a crucial role throughout the learning process in managing and monitoring students’ activities.” (p. 11)

In this respect, it is best that an instructor remain somewhat fluid, observing online interactions not only for content but for opportunities for SP among the students and themselves. As I have mentioned before, not every teacher or class may lend itself to this type of oversight and in some cases, issues outside of an instructor’s control such as technology can get in the way. But, as the research supports, these types of efforts, no matter how small can lead to increased student and instructor satisfaction. Or as Greenberger (2016) puts it: Put another way, if an online instructor measures as harmoniously passionate for the activity online instruction, that person would be more likely to strive for positive interpersonal interactions, even in the face of frustrations caused by the delivery method (p. 177).

As I have mentioned in regards to student preparation for online learning, it's also best to assume that instructors have little preparation or experience in this area as well. This being the case, training instructors to teach online, specifically in the area of SP would be wise.

### **Instructor Training**

As previously written, training, and to a lesser extent, mentoring has appeared in the research as a primary concern for instructors as they prepare to teach online. This has not changed, as more recent authors have examined a variety of methods and results ranging from faculty observations (Purcell, Scott, & Mixon-Brookshire, 2017) to actual online trainings (Lane, 2013; Bachy & Lebrun, 2015) and instructor learning styles (McVey, 2014).

Several researchers have examined and identified methods for training. Cicco (2013) developed a series of five protocols instructors of asynchronous courses which includes navigating online courses, training on assessing and understanding learning styles, online course simulation (undertaken from a student role), tools for relationship building (communications strategies for interacting with students), and finally a launch of the actual course which includes an online mentor with previous online instructional experience. The online course simulation is of particular importance as few online instructors have actually taken an online course and the experience may help them better understand the student. Hamilton (2016) writes "Allowing faculty to experience distance learning from the student's perspective fosters an enhanced perception of student needs. It also allows them to experience first-hand the challenges of learning online (p. 37). Andrade (2015) suggests the following five approaches to training:

1. Teacher training is particularly effective when it is based on the philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of the online courses that instructors will teach; this helps them gain familiarity

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with various course activities that students will experience and understand the rationale for these activities.

2. Familiarity with structure, dialogue, and autonomy can help instructors apply these components to their online teaching to facilitate a learning experience in which learners are guided toward the capacity for greater choice and self-direction.
3. Implementing the elements of goal-setting, learning and applying new teaching strategies or adapting known strategies, and reflection on the effectiveness of these strategies parallels effective student learning processes based on the theory of self-regulated learning. When teachers engage in these activities, they build their repertoire of effective practices for online teaching and learning.
4. Collaboration, and specifically the concept of collaborative control, demonstrates that online learning is not an isolated activity and that socialization, support, team-building, and problem-solving can be developed through well-designed online course activities. These can result in ownership of learning, self-direction, and autonomy.
5. Well-designed training should help instructors recognize how they can incorporate their own voice through response to learners in order to make a course that may have been authored by someone else their own. (p. 8)

Of particular note is Andrade's mention of collaboration (the design of activities towards community) and instructor "voice" (personalization of the learning environment in some sense) as it lends itself to the development of SP. Instructor training online towards the development of presence (either as an instructor or as a larger effort to the class in general) is also important to mention here as is the importance of instructor immediacy in the perception of SP. Though there appear to be few studies on methods by which instructors can learn SP, there are no shortage of



studies examining the methods an instructor might use to increase social presence. There are a wide variety of these in the research ranging from traditional topics such as interaction (Thomas, 2017), and student performance (Hoey, 2017; Shelton, Hung, & Lowenthal, 2017; Joksimovic et al., 2015; Campbell, 2014) to the ethical use of social media (Forbes, 2017), and practicing non-verbal awareness (Kelly & Claus, 2015). This would appear to suggest the need for actual training in SP as opposed to suggestions or “best practices”. There is a difference between training (actual instructions and practice) and suggestions (groceries lists of how-to’s). The latter can thought to be sufficient when, as is often is the case in education and particularly in online education, it is assumed that instructors know what to do. Paquette (2016) writes “Although much of the social presence literature delivers suggestions and practical experiences, there appears to be fewer studies providing instructors with foundational methods upon which they can build and implement their courses” (p. 85).

It is difficult to learn and/or change behaviors without actual practice, especially in the case of SP where the majority of the research indicates teacher immediacy (behaviors) as a significant factor in the perception of SP. While it is helpful to know best practices, ultimately behavioral training would seem to have the best chance of success. “While many research studies point to the importance of faculty development and training on how to develop and teach online courses, more specific details are rare. Methods for teaching faculty about online course development and online teaching as well as the types of faculty development that are effective are not often discussed in detail” (Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016, para. 12). In a comprehensive literature review examining issues in online learning, Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago (2017) identified the need and desire for instruction amongst online faculty. Of the few that do attempt to provide a framework for training, many looked at trainings that were provided either through consortiums, the universities themselves or in some cases, both. Godin, Leader, Gibson, Mar-

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shall, Poddar, and Cardon (2017) found that instructors who had completed trainings prior to teaching online were able to create social and cognitive presence at a high level in their courses. What's important to note here, is that the effort to create programs by which faculty might learn to create and implement SP is out there, but only if there is a university commitment. It is suggested here that when training is made available, noting the conclusions of the research presented here documenting the concern of faculty in regards to training and readiness to teach online, it will most likely be sought out and has the potential to translate in online instruction. This is important to note, especially when considering SP because we are talking about something *in addition* to teaching a class, a behavior we hope for but certainly cannot assume an online teacher is aware of especially in regard to implementation online. Paquette (2016) writes:

“Future research based on this concept of training instructors to use social presence cues in the online classroom (teacher presence) and promoting social presence among participants within that environment, could prove to be one way to arrive at the goal of cognitive presence, the students gaining a better understanding of the information being presented. In conjunction with these findings, researchers might be able to determine the significance of the demonstration of social, teacher, and cognitive presences on the motivation, persistence, and retention of online students. (p. 99)

While she speaks to the potential of SP focused training, she also notes the challenge: “*Teacher presence* does not come naturally to many online instructors” (p. 99).

The research on actual tools or skills for creating SP are few but do provide helpful tips. Paquette (2016) divides SP cues into two categories, those that reveal the instructor and those that recognize the participant. Those that reveal the instructor include expressing humor (telling jokes or sharing humorous experiences or stories), exhibiting emotions (using emoticons or punctuation for emphasis), providing self-disclosure (Sharing personal stories, providing back-

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ground information or sharing plans, dreams or goals) and interjecting allusions of physical presence (focusing on time as in the days date or referring to assignments in real-time). Those that recognize the participant include using greetings (using terms such as “Hi” or “hello”), addressing people by name, complimenting other’s ideas (referring students to the exceptional posts of other students or recognizing stronger posts by the names of the students), and offering support or agreement for an idea (providing acknowledgement and support for posted ideas, sharing similar opinions or agreeing with points made and offering further insights or directions based on those ideas) (pp. 106-107).

In order to identify best practice in training for online instructors, Schmidt et al. (2016) convened and interviewed focus groups of online instructors from a variety of levels at a large, southeastern university. Many of the respondents indicated that they had received training in how to use the technology required but acknowledged the significant difference between knowing the technology and actually designing courses and teaching effectively. The authors suggest that a variety of professional development opportunities should be made available to instructors in addition to technology including, self-directed learning, mentorship, small group collaborations with other faculty in similar disciplines, small group trainings focusing on pedagogy and curriculum development and that trainings be short and informal in nature. They conclude by writing:

Success in making the transition from face-to-face to online teaching is dependent upon the availability of opportunities for learning how to teach online, but those opportunities must actually be helpful to the online instructor. An understanding of the specific ways instructors learn to teach online is critical for administrators, as they are often the ones making decisions about professional development offerings for those instructors. (p. 10)

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Ideally, assuming university support is available, online instructors could participate in training, Pedagogy, curriculums issues and more specifically creating SP (for student experience *and* their own), the opportunity to take a course (in this case, the course they are designing) as part of a course simulation, and faculty mentor with successful experience teaching online.

As most research on SP indicates teacher immediacy behaviors playing a significant role, training specifically in that area would be wise. While it may be difficult to reinvent an instructor in regards to classroom immediacy behaviors, an online environment actually lends itself well to this effort as it precludes the types of behaviors normally associated with immediacy in-person and remanufactures those moments in text through responses to student interaction. Paquette (2016) suggests a check-list for instructors to remind and help them record social cues towards SP. While an idea like this might seem implausible on an actual classroom setting, the online environment could actually be improved using this method. Ideas like this are simple and easy to implement and could become habit, increasing the more experience an instructor has online.

### **Personal Reflection: Interpersonal Communication Online**

As part of our pilot, I was asked to design and offer a course of my own. After careful consideration, I chose Interpersonal Communication because I knew it would be a difficult subject matter to teach online. The typical interpersonal communication course focuses on one-on-one relationships (dyads) and is a combination of theory and exercises designed to exemplify those theories. For example, as the instructor, I would discuss a theory on eye contact and then divide the class into dyads to practice different methods of eye contact and then report their results. Obviously, this is not the most practical course to choose to offer online since it is assumed that, like most online courses, students would be taking the class alone thus eliminating the dyadic setting easily offered in a classroom. Knowing that this would be a difficult challenge (designing a

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course that was largely incongruent and counterintuitive to what might be taught ideally online), I reasoned that implementing and maintaining SP would be at a higher level of difficulty than most courses especially since I would be asking students to perform the same class-based exercises while they were in a setting that didn't guarantee the presence of a dyad. My weekly assignments/modules focused on a chosen aspect of the chapter assigned for that week (i.e. taking a survey, reporting the score and reflecting on that score) and then responding to the posts of at least three other students in the class. I intentionally kept it simple in hopes that fewer, less time-consuming assignments might result in more time for reflection and more authentic feedback than forced, classroom exercises. As there were no required opportunities for eye contact (visual chats, etc.) I was working from the assumption that writing out their personal insights would be every bit as focused for them as practicing an actual interaction, and thus as valuable a learning experience. At first, interaction was limited to fairly simple, surface comments and basic interactions. After closely examining the design of the course, I realized I had assumed that while the content could exist without forced dyads, I had not factored in the role of facilitator that an instructor must play in a class of this nature. Like any online class, I faced the challenge of replicating the real-time opportunities for discussion and reflection that I could easily encourage in a classroom setting. To remedy the problem, I chose to require students to ask a question along with their observations of their fellow classmate's posts and answer the questions asked of them by their classmates. The results were encouraging as I began to see my students go beyond the basic requirements of the assignments and actually engage each other. I still teach this course and it is far from perfect but each semester I try something different in order to encourage more of a community and interaction similar to that of a typical classroom. I see this as an example of how an instructor and students can work together to create and maintain SP real time without al-

tering the content of the course. Though I in no way see this as a universal application, it does illustrate the potential for a largely classroom-taught course to exist online and for that class to be subject to change in real time. Every class is different but from my experience, the focus on SP has been enough for me to actively consider ways I can feasibly alter my courses which in turn has helped me think more about the role my students play in the larger context of course content and delivery.

### **Quantity vs. Quality**

This brings up an important issue on the difference between quantity and quality of discussion. While there are several rubrics available to assess the “depth” of discussion, ultimately it is the instructor who should decide what is truly required of the students to contribute and drive the quality of interaction thus creating and sustaining an online learning community. Ultimately only the instructor will know what is required of discussion and how that factors in to the greater fabric of the course. For that reason, it is recommended here that instructors develop their own rubrics for participation so that they can capture what they feel is the best type or quality of discussion for their course. For my course, it is difficult because the authenticity of interaction in a given dyad can only be interpreted and assessed by those involved. What is considered an effective communication event or beneficial in some way to both parties is largely up to the interpretation of those involved and not myself as a third party participant/observer. To date, the majority of intervention I have been required to do has been to train students to ask questions rather than make statements regarding others’ posts. While it seems obvious at first, this is actually an important skill students need to learn in regards to interpersonal communication as it requires the “listener” or in this case the other online student to read critically (in the absence of an actual listening setting) and respond in a way that furthers the conversation. I have

seen improvement in this area as well as an increase in the level of interaction, but since the quality of the interaction can only be determined by the actual participants, it is difficult to know their perceptions of the event; a difficulty inherent in all interpersonal communications research.

### **Sharing and Immediacy**

I have shown here how immediacy or attempts at immediacy are valued by online learners and go a long way towards the feeling and experience of SP. Though not every instructor may see themselves in a position to create immediacy in their online courses, Arbough (2001) suggests that immediacy may be generalizable to online courses. Jackson and Rodriguez (2010) found that instructor enthusiasm ranked the highest of 5 behaviors (the others being clearly stated expectations, instructor accessibility, lectures and activities, and climate). They write, “further definition and refinement of teaching strategies which generate effective social behaviors and comfortable learning environments in the online class would benefit all online educators and participating students” (p. 92). Conaway, Easton, and Schmidt (2005) suggest 3 ways in which instructors for online business classes might facilitate immediacy:

“First, online business communication instructors must recognize their roles as facilitators who monitor discussion and provide feedback. To encourage peer learning, the instructor can model behavior for students by leading the online discussion, summarizing discussion points, and providing feedback. Next, the instructor may have students assume roles for various assignments such as team editor, facilitator, or recorder. These dedicated assignments automatically place students in interactive roles. Third, the instructor may intervene appropriately in online discussions. Being highly involved early in the course, for example, tends to set direction and model desired behaviors. The instructor may then disengage as the students take on those facilitative behaviors for their own groups. Finally, the instructor must provide clear expectations for the

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level of participation required from the students (p. 32). To that end, they provide the following rubric for online discussion:

*Unsatisfactory:* (Will Not Receive Full Credit) Satisfies Requirement Outstanding Limited response that only touches the surface of the answer. Repeats previous comments with vague input such as “me too” or “I agree.” Does not build the usefulness of the discussion or the sense of community within the group. Postings are minimal or late and do not show a comprehension of material.

*Satisfies Requirement:* Completes the assignment as required by responding with a useful answer or comment in a timely manner such that others can gain additional insight. Supports the online sense of community by reinforcing others and creating a welcoming place for discussion. Responses are posted on time to allow feedback and discussion.

*Outstanding:* Completes assignment by posting insightful ideas that are fully developed and demonstrate a genuine understanding of the topic. Comments often extend the discussion and offer unique opportunities to apply the material. Timeliness of posting allows a full conversation to emerge and encourage a strong intellectual online community (p. 33).

In my teaching I have experimented with several methods for increasing the perception of immediacy. The nonverbal communication course I teach needs to have an immediacy piece simply because of the nature of the course necessitates that I encourage students to share what they may consider personal information. To this end, I have found several strategies useful including humor (wherever appropriate), asking questions designed to “probe” or encourage greater sharing through personal examples and sharing my own personal experiences with the questions and assignments I ask of them and by relating their experiences to similar ones I have had in my life. I have even asked them for advice regarding situations I have in my life when they



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relate a similar experience. While I can't say this has increased student perceptions of my behaviors as those consistent with immediacy (knowing that their versions of immediacy might be different and that my role of instructor may change the dynamic) I have seen positive comments in my evaluations referring to these efforts. But these issues are largely typical for any online instructor attempting to encourage the perception of immediacy. We can never truly know what behaviors our students regard as immediacy and the role of instructor in a purely online setting is likely to change the dynamic. My probing question or effort to express my own feeling regarding the subject matter may be just as easily seen as an additional question that needs to be answered in order to fulfill the requirement for that week. In this sense, teaching online and teaching in a classroom setting are similar. We can never truly know how our students view our efforts towards engagement but to not attempt to do so would be to ignore the opportunity for something far richer to take place. It is highly improbable that we reach every student but making the effort may mean we reach more of them.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the process of undertaking this inquiry, it was my goal to find ways that students and instructors in an online setting might go about creating and maintaining SP towards a shared educational experience beneficial to both. Though ultimately I am driven by helping my son, the growth in online learning has resulted in the opportunity to help many others as well. Navigating the waters of college education can be difficult for both students and instructors, and adding an online dimension to that, for a population more familiar with the traditional classroom setting, only increases that complexity. It is hard to imagine that by the time my son goes to college he will not have an online experience of some sort, as will the millions of other college students around the world. As a college professor and administrator well versed in online education, I see the potential for success as well as failure along many lines. For this reason, several key points are discussed in the following section, beginning with a list of 20 considerations I have developed as a result of my research as well as personal experience which I hope will be of help to online instructors and administrators as they develop and improve their current online courses.

### **Considerations for online instructors and administrators**

- 1: A good instructor is better than technology. Technology may make a course better, but the instructor will always be the heart of a course. No level of technology can save a poorly designed course, but a good instructor can easily overcome poor technology.
- 2: SP is student experience. It's widely considered a phenomena (something that either occurs or does not and as such is usually assessed at the completion of a course), but can

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and should be considered a process that is undertaken and maintained throughout a course whenever possible.

3: The goal of creating SP should be that it become an organic process largely student-driven.

4. All OL classes are different and not every class may have the opportunity to create and maintain SP. As widely supported as SP is in the research, all classes are different and only an instructor truly knows what is possible in the course of a semester.

5: Not every student cares about SP of learning communities. Some are just there to fulfill a requirement and may not want to be bothered with community.

6: Unpredictability is the norm. Every online class tend to have ebbs and flows just like regular, in-class settings.

7: The effort to create and maintain SP is not likely to be easy. SP requires almost constant upkeep through vigilant monitoring.

8: Like any class, the first time an instructor tries something new is usually the most awkward for everyone. Like anything else, this takes time and patience. In my experience, future efforts are always easier than the first.

9: Never assume students know what they are doing. Retention rates online tend to be lower than traditional classrooms. Students are more prone to disappearing online than in regular classes. Just because you appear to have SP doesn't mean every student is feeling the same. Online students can feel "left out" far easier than traditional students. For this reason, reaching out to students is essential especially when they appear to be participating less or not at all.

10: SP has proven to help retention rates.

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11: In cases where there is little to no university support, success in online classes can often signal to the larger administration that this is a viable form of delivery, worthy of additional support.

12: Start slowly and build from there. An increased number of universities are starting more slowly than they did in the past, deliberately, strategically augmenting existing programs instead of rolling out entire majors. You are now more likely to see hybrid classes before an entirely online class is developed as a kind of testing ground. This was the case at my university when our “high-touch” environment mandated a slower, more gradual shift to purely online courses.

13: Play to your strengths, always. Choosing to develop online courses should come from a position of strength and need. For example, impacted programs that have already proven to be successful is a good starting point.

14 Never assume you know what students want, ask them whenever possible. In the absence of a traditional classroom setting where we can simply ask for a show of hands or gauge some other verbal or nonverbal means of understanding, the online instructor needs to reach out.

15. Teaching online can be every bit as much work and sometimes more than a traditional classroom. Making the switch to online requires a good deal of planning and thought on the part of an instructor to make sure the transition is as smooth as possible.

16 Anticipate growing pains. New methods of instruction are rarely easy, online instruction is no different. Think of the first class you ever taught. What have you changed?

Why did you make those changes? We grow as instructors because we need to in order

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to deliver our instruction in the best possible way. In my experience, every class is different as is every semester, year and generation.

15. Adapt and be flexible whenever possible.

16. Plan for the worst, things can only get better. Online is best with support but many online teachers don't get training or outside resources, and neither do students.

17. Don't assume your students are ready to be online learners. Though they tend to be more tech savvy, that doesn't always translate online. Being active online and with social media is very different from taking a course online. If this is the case, assigning student mentors is an option. These can be current students in your class who have already taken a course or courses online. They can help the other students and often times, students feel more comfortable and are more receptive to other students than they might be to you as their instructor.

18. Online success in general (even in a single class, your class) is an opportunity for education for many. This is not just about older, returning adults, this is also about opportunities for students across the board and potentially those with learning disabilities who might excel in this platform but not necessarily in standard classrooms.

19. Social presence can't hurt. While there may be those who are simply taking the class because it meets a requirement and are not interested in SP, the research presented here is pretty clear that SP is one of the main factors by which students see value in online courses.

20. Attempting to create social presence is an exercise in social presence. Just by making the attempt to check in with students and offer them a definition for SP means you are actually implementing SP. The research on immediacy presented here is pretty clear and of-

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fering them a chance to create and hopefully play a large role in sustaining SP is a form of immediacy because it shows you are aware and care about the shape of their learning community.

### **Taking social presence from phenomena to process**

I have argued here that while the research on SP is largely focused on as a phenomena, it usually either occurs or doesn't as a result of intentional instructor behaviors or the lack there of. Additionally SP should also be viewed as a process. In viewing SP as a process, while also acknowledging that it is still a phenomena, we are better positioned to think of ways we might go about developing strategies to implement it instead of focusing on whether or not it occurred. Continued research regarding SP as a process may also result in changes to how we define and study SP. As research in this area continues, a process approach may very well lead to additional research or methods by which we endeavor to create and maintain SP in our online courses. I have attempted to show here that efforts to create SP in online courses may well enhance the experience for both the instructors and students but more research on the results of those how those attempts needs to be ongoing. As we attempt to create the "process" we may well find entirely new ways to regard SP and additional means of study.

### **Understanding the effort towards community**

Online classrooms or general group efforts online towards SP are often described as communities. This is a valuable designation in regards to the study of SP because it allows us to think more in terms of a community and less of a classroom. Our perceptions of traditional classroom experiences are widely different from what takes place online and this often requires and adjustment in how we regard and work to create our experience. The shift can be a disorienting one for many and efforts towards a greater understanding of the nature of online communi-

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ties and more specifically how we work to create our communities (efforts as well as the needs that drive us) should continue. In seeking to develop SP, we are dependent upon the classroom community we create and the ability of that community to work together to sustain SP. In this sense, SP is very much a “team effort” and teams are far more difficult to develop when we don’t actually spend time together. The metaphor of team here is important to consider because classrooms, online or traditional, all come with different players each of whom has different motivations, expectations and reasons for taking the course. Future research regarding the identification and value of the differing types of “players” and their roles in the overall process of SP would be valuable. Those who thrive in traditional classrooms are not always the best online students due to their reliance on classroom interactions. Conversely, those who do not typically do well in traditional classrooms may thrive online. We still tend to classify and recognize students in terms of traditional classroom behaviors (attendance, participation, GPA, etc.), so it makes sense that we also work to develop new “typologies” to better recognize and evaluate online behaviors and their relationship to success for both students and instructors.

### **Social presence is ever-changing**

Future research should regard SP as ever-changing. We realize that technology changes, but we also need to remember that colleges and universities, courses, teachers and especially students change as well. As we continue to study SP we need to acknowledge all of the variables and the inevitable change that occurs in the college landscape. This is why systems theory and constructivism are so valuable. As our surroundings change, our lens must change as well. We have no problem classifying student by generation and then designating certain behaviors as typical to that generation but we often forget to think about the generation of an instructor, or other factors such as the role history plays in the mission of a university. The educational landscape is

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constantly changing. Student demographics, industry, social and cultural changes (in the larger community and the world at large) all have some kind of influence on our students, instructors and classrooms. We may be well be headed to a time where the typical, brick and mortar college campus plays less of a role than online delivery for most colleges. If this truly is the case, then aspects of SP highly cited in the literature, such as teacher immediacy for example, are bound to change. We have already seen a shift in demographics of online learners from largely adult-continuation students to the typical college student. Future studies and exploration of SP will need to embrace this change as we continue to develop and deliver courses online.

### **Conclusions**

As online learning continues to grow at the college level, there are future opportunities for research and applications which can strengthen this method of course delivery. The research on SP in online learning supports the connection between SP and student satisfaction. There are a variety of ways in which students experience SP and how SP is manufactured but ultimately SP seems to be a consistent factor in the perceived values of online courses. To date however, SP has been regarded as a phenomenon that either occurs or doesn't instead of a process which might be implemented during an online course in an attempt to create the value supported in the research. Instructors seem to be the ones best suited to attempt this by simply reaching out to students and engaging them not only in the determination of what SP might be for them but also in the maintenance of SP thorough the course of an online class. Though there is a great deal of research on the types of activities or exercises that help students experience SP, there is very little research on students, in conjunction with their instructor, participating in the creation and maintenance of SP. This dissertation is intended to start that process and larger conversation so



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that a new body of research might be created which engages the students in the creation and maintenance of SP throughout an online course. Since SP is a student-based perception, it makes sense that they are the ones that help us determine and facilitate it based on their perceptions and needs. Although every class, instructor and students are very different, while the idea of students participation may not be a perfect fit, it can be a potentially fruitful process that allows us to assess our students in a way that can be a positive addition and increasingly helpful in navigating the challenges of the online landscape. Students are increasingly participating in social networking applications and activities, the focus of which, self-expression and community building could translate in online courses which require as much. Social Identity and Categorization theory as well as Constructivism and Student Centered Learning all give us insight into how online learners develop their presence and help us consider the ways in which we can give our students a voice as to the nature of SP.

Students are often unprepared for the rigors of an online course or simply may view the experience as another requirement, while many instructors are still new to this method of delivery. Course platforms can also be difficult to navigate and the challenges of modifying curriculum can be daunting especially for those new to online teaching. Like many educational efforts, successful online learning requires that everyone contribute to the process, students and instructors alike. The classroom, whether brick and mortar or online is very much a team effort where everyone is equally responsible for successful outcomes. As colleges and instructors alike grapple with the challenges of the changing landscape of college education, we need to continually look for ways to improve the experience of our learners, especially online where many unknowns still exist. It is recommended that mentors be available for students as well as faculty to ease the transition as well as support the creation and maintenance of SP. If we can begin to

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work towards empowering our students and instilling in them the responsibility they have for maintaining the learning community, we can begin to learn from and improve upon our efforts. I also believe that further research on the potential advantages of SP for “other” student populations, specifically students with disabilities may offer educators new and improved ways of serving these populations. As the parent of a disabled student, I have seen my son’s struggles greatly decrease when his instructors have use various online formats and have maintained those formats with even a lesser degree of SP. Just knowing there is “someone out there” seems to reassure him through his daily academic struggles. As a longtime college instructor, I initially struggled with the online format and continue to discover new challenges with every new course. I often look to my students for answers as to what methods will best help support them in learning. One of the main reasons for this dissertation is that I believe online education can be much improved by simply implementing the things that have proven to be successful like SP. But to do that in an authentic way or one that would actually enhance and sustain SP, needs to consider both the faculty and the students, the space they come from and the space they share online. I believe online education sometimes suffers from what I call the “online education perception gap”. Simply put, because of our shared experience of education, we have come to assume that a learning experience will come with the typical facets of a classroom including desks, teachers, classmates, whiteboards, etc. However, when we either teach or take a class online, we are greeted with a far different experience, one that either isolates us or forces us to reach out and forge a community online. Until the first generation of students completes a fully online educational experience, something I actually hope never happens, the Online Education Perception Gap” will continue to present a challenge to online students and teachers as they continue to adapt to the medium. In the absence of the typical classroom experience, it’s important that students and faculty have

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some way to work together to create an environment that works for both whether that is one that comes close to replicating an actual classroom or just focuses on features like SP that help make the experience more comfortable in the short term. From my experience teaching online, my initial biases did play a large role in my level of acceptance initially. I did feel that I was spending much more time online than I should have been and I believe that in large part, affected the way I taught. Like any new teacher, I was initially clumsy with the technology and integrating it with a course I had traditionally taught in a classroom. It was not a pleasant experience at first (I assume this was the case for my students as well), but gradually it became tolerable. After several more years I found ways to incorporate more of my classroom strengths online, but it was difficult to do this initially because there was no classroom. I think we forget that teaching online is much more than “distance learning”. It’s actually an organic, ever-changing experience similar to our classrooms but without the factors that make them know-able or observable like seeing our students on a regular basis or seeing the visual cues we have come to look for in regards to perceived understanding or lack thereof. Making and understanding the transition from a regular classroom to online delivery, *while* it is happening, can be difficult and really underscores the importance of considering faculty impressions or perceptions.

When an instructor engaged in a new technology and the pedagogical challenges that come with it has concerns on the outset, it is easy to assume that this may reflect on the quality of instruction if not the overall confidence with which the course is taught. The online settings biggest difference is the ability to see our students, something we have become accustomed to and utilized as a tool, amongst other things to gauge understanding student learning needs. In the absence of physical cues, communication with students becomes increasingly important not only for the student but for the instructor who is faced with the challenge of becoming familiar with

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the needs of their students without daily, visual interaction. So how do we solve this problem? For instructors, there is always a reflective piece by which we step away from our classrooms and engage in the process of self-analytic moments that reveal to us, with each different class, our strengths, weaknesses and ways to improve.

As online education continues to grow, our students, in working with their instructors, can better help us understand the most productive methods of course delivery and help us discover and remain open to the types of changes required to improve upon the educational experience.

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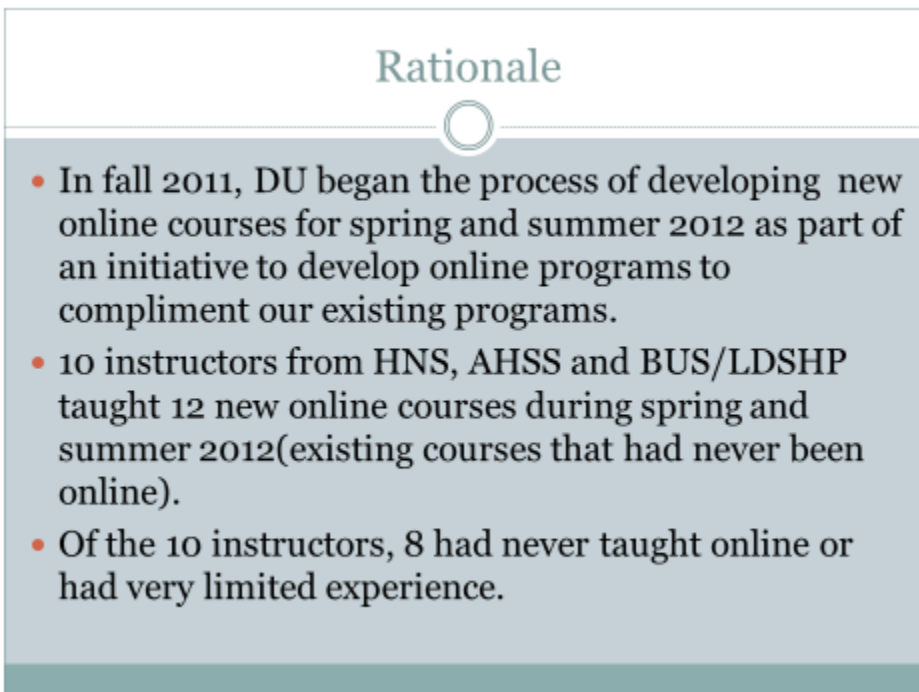
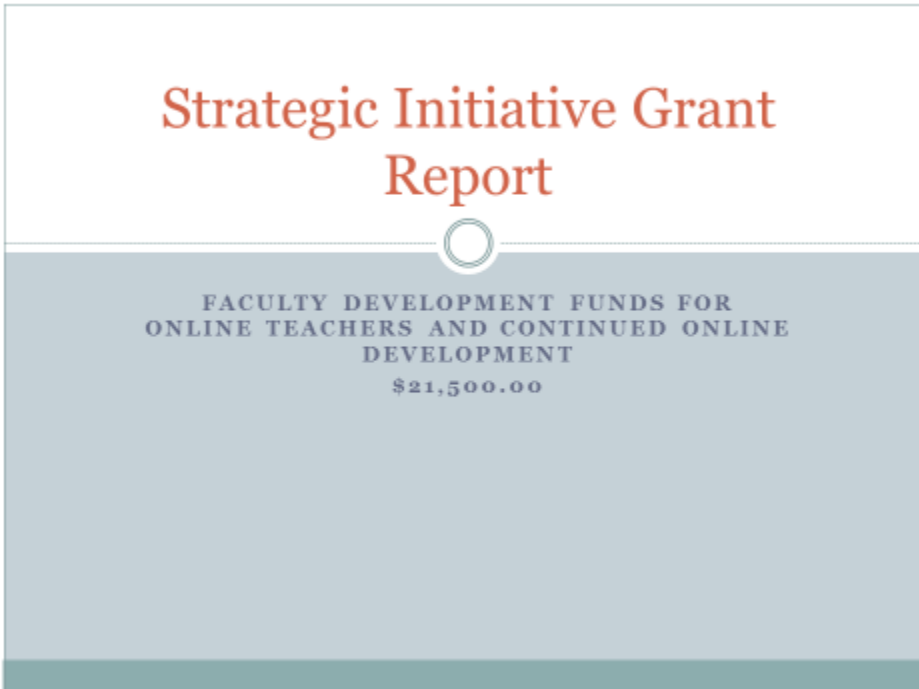
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## Appendix A

Summary of the Dominican University of California online program pilot at the one-year mark  
(2011-2012).



## Goal

- To allow the new online instructors to join an online consortium and attend one conference on online learning and course development.
- Research shows that faculty who feel they are supported in the creation and instruction of online classes tend to enjoy the experience and view online learning as valuable method of instruction.
- Happy teachers mean happy.....

## Faculty Participants (10) & Schools

- (Communications and Media Studies)
- (Public Health)
- (Health and Natural Sciences)
- (Health and Natural Sciences)
- (Sustainability MBA)
- (Service Learning)
- (Communications And Media Studies)
- (Health and Natural Sciences)
- (Humanities)
- (Political Science)

## Results

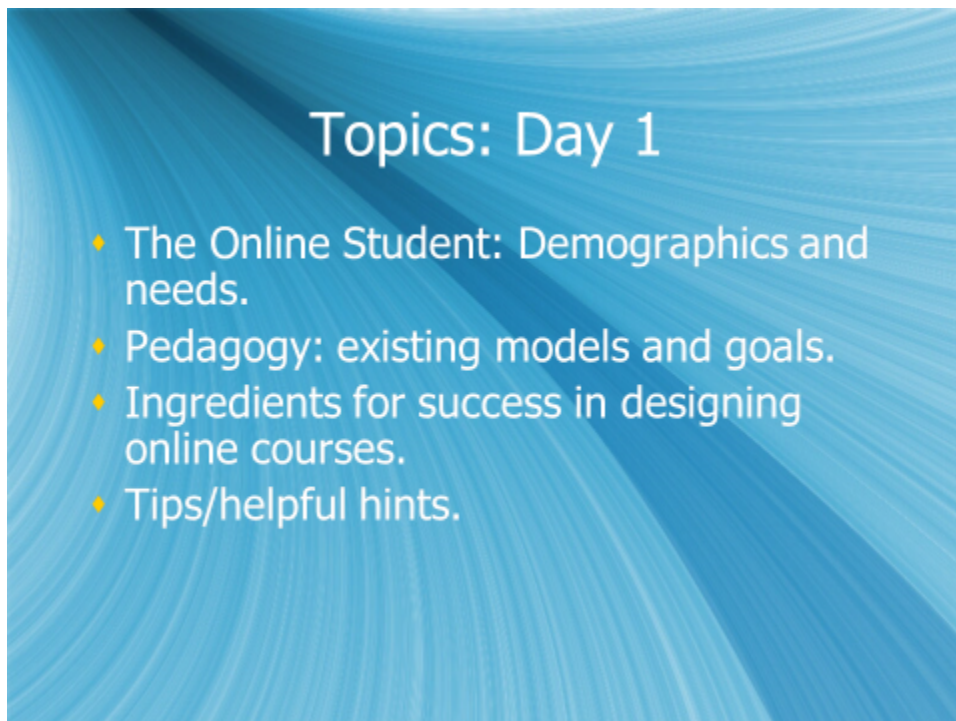
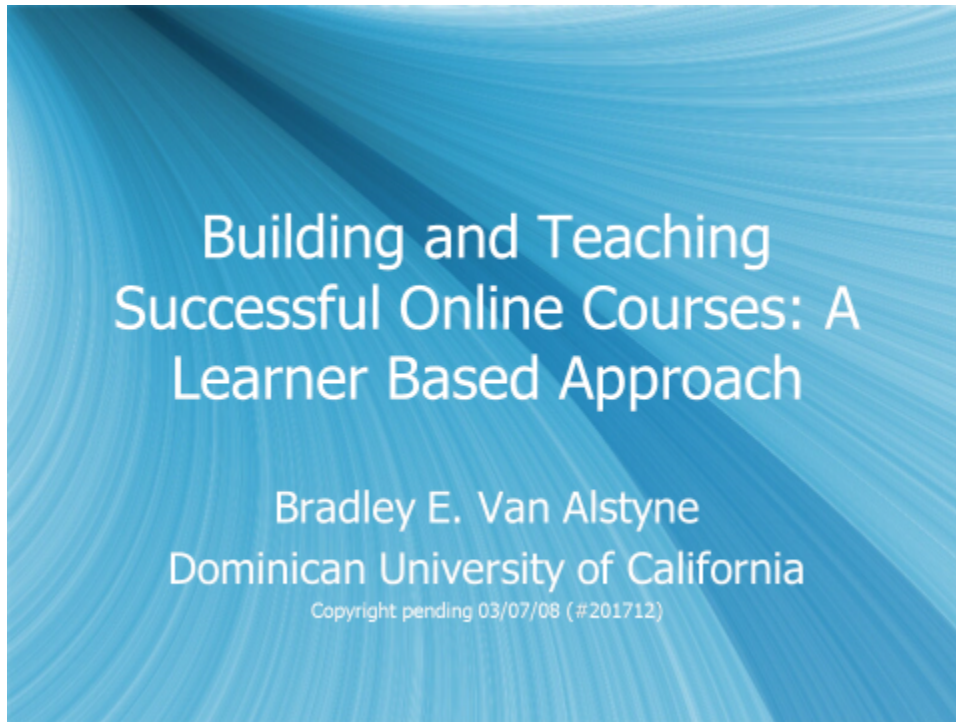
- All faculty signed up for SLOAN-C (One of the best online consortiums).
- 3 faculty members attended conferences or took courses.

## Suggestions for the Future

1. To run the grant for a longer period of time to allow for more conference attendance.
2. To set up a center, online or on campus to provide information, help, etc.
3. To involve students in consortium and conference attendance so that they might help in future course development.
4. To identify one or two select conferences for a group to attend.
5. Host a conference?

**Appendix B**

Faculty Training PowerPoint for the Dominican University of California Online Pilot.



## The Online Student

- Culture
- Needs
- Statistics
- Retention

## The Online Student: Retention

- The good news: usually higher retention rates due to the large amounts of working adults taking courses.
- The bad news: much harder to counsel online students and the “rescue rates” are much lower.



## The Online Student: Culture

- Age: 16-91
- Gender: 59% female, 41% male.
- Largest age group: 25-45
- Technology exposure (range): from web access and use their entire lives to sending emails and online shopping.

## The Online Student: Needs

- Finish previously incomplete degree
- Secondary degrees.
- Time and family considerations dictating educational choices.
- Results...Fast. (occupational needs)
- All of the above

## Online Students: Statistics

- 3.5 million college students (1 in every 5) took an online course last year nearly doubling the figures from 5 years earlier. (NY Times 10/31/07)
- 2006-2007 showed an increase of 12% growth in online students. (Allen and Seamen 2008)

## Pedagogy: Existing Models

- 2 main focuses: technology and student perception.
- Technology: system first, curriculum/student second.
- Student Perception: curriculum/student first, operating system second



## Existing Models: Student Focus Compilation

- Learners are actively involved and receive feedback.
- Learners understand the characteristics of excellent work.
- Students become increasingly sophisticated learners.

## Existing Models: Student Focus (cont.)

- Professors coach and facilitate, intertwining teaching and assessing.
- Learning is interpersonal and all learners, students and teachers are respected and valued.
- Professors reveal they are learners too.
- Learning offers significant connections to personal and professional lives.



## Student Focus Common Themes for Success in Student Focused Models:

- Feedback
- Interactive
- Methods of evaluation are clear.
- The role of the course to personal and professional growth is known.
- Teaching and assessment is ongoing and constant.
- Teachers and students are valued and are respected.

## Exercise

- With a partner, discuss your favorite course or favorite teacher, specifically what did they do that made you like them and the course as much as you did? (list 3-5 things)
- How can you do the same online? (list 3-5 things)
- What was the worst course you ever took, or teacher you ever had? Why was it or he/she so bad? (List 3-5 things).

## What Not To Do (most commonly reported complaints)

- Little or no feedback.
- Unreasonable time expectations.
- Uninteresting.
- Little opportunity for interaction.
- Mostly reading and tests on the reading.

## What Not To Do (most commonly reported complaints, cont)

- Courses consisted of little else beyond online lectures.
- Grading, class structure unclear or inconsistent.
- Little or no opportunity to “do” the subject.
- Applicability or role of the course in the future was unknown.



## Student Driven Curriculum

- Who are my students?
- Why are they taking this course
- What do they need to gain from this course?

## Instructor Driven Curriculum

- What are my needs?
- What are my goals?
- What are my strengths
- How can I emphasize my strengths?

## The Computer: What will I be to my students?

- How will not being in the same room with your students change the way you teach?
- How will this change the way your students see you?
- Most research reports student's concerns regarding isolation and loneliness.

## Current Research: Successful online courses consistently report SOCIAL PRESENCE (SP)

- Definitions (many):
- Originally discussed in 1976 by John Short, Ederyn Williams and Bruce Christie as "The degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience (and perceived intimacy and immediacy) of the interpersonal relationships" (p.164). Users will seek out mediums that offer SP and avoid those that don't.



## Other Definitions

Richardson and Swan (2003)-Originally construed as an inherent feature of differing media, social presence can be explored by examining a variety of issues which may contribute to the social climate of the classroom. (p. 70)

Garrison and Anderson (2003)-Participants ability in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as a "real" person (i.e through their full personality) through the medium of communication being used. (p. 23)

## Current Research: Successful Online Courses cont.

- Social Presence Research: Main Ingredient: teacher immediacy.
- Definition: Originally reported by Wiener and Mehrabian and defined as: "The distance a communicator puts between themselves and the object of their message" (1968).
- Main sources: Verbal and Nonverbal behaviors (feedback, classroom interaction, eye contact, etc).

## Current Research: Creating Immediacy Online

Periodic check-ins with students (personal emails, etc), non-global.

- Video conferencing (Skype, etc)
- Scheduled one-on-one conferences with students
- Supportive feedback on assignments.
- Opportunities for personal sharing based on student's experiences.

## Current Research: Creating Immediacy Online, cont.

- Text messaging.
- Globally supportive comments.
- Humor
- Flexibility
- Assignments focusing on student self discovery



## Curriculum Goals (the million dollar questions!)

- What would you want?
- What were your favorite courses?
- How would those look online?

## Exercise

1. Recall your earlier list of favorite courses and teachers.
2. Given your particular subject matter, what are three-five things you think you could put into your class that would increase social presence?

## Student Descriptions of Successful online courses

- Interactive
- Experiential
- Interesting
- Variety (resources, videos, layout, etc)
- Resources

## Interactive

- Students to students
- Teacher to students



## Experiential

- Chance to experience the curriculum (do the thing being taught through exercises, assignments, etc)
- Students had the opportunity to recall or relate their own experiences
- The instructor's experience was made apparent and was used throughout the course.

## Interesting

- Exercises, readings and activities were more than lectures.
- Students had the chance to interact, work together and/or share experiences regarding the exercises.
- Exercises included some sort of self discovery which could be discussed.

## Variety

- The course layout was more than text.
- Aesthetics: pictures, resources, videos, etc.
- Places to “go” other than just curriculum (student spaces, chat or discussion rooms, “lounge areas” for students only, links to other course related areas

## Resources

- Tutoring/Mentoring
- Links to other forms of campus information
- Disability services
- Job Placement



## Exercise: Creating Immediacy Online

- With a partner, create a list of 3-5 things you think you might be able to do to increase immediacy within the confines of your course.
- Share with your partner to get their feedback.

## Successful Models!

- Opportunities for Immediacy and Social Presence!
- Popular: well visited, heavily populated, voluntarily sought out!
- Interactive!
- Extremely high retention rates!

## Successful Models!

- Social Networking Sites:
- MySpace
- Facebook
- Current research is underway in academic communities to find a way to incorporate these models.

## Social Networking Research

- Grew to 68 million users from 2005-2006.
- Expected to grow 47% per year.
- In 2009, Facebook accounted for 38% of U.S. web traffic, MySpace accounted for 58% of U.S. web traffic.
- Between June 2008 and January, Facebook members age 35-54 quadrupled. Members older than 55 tripled.
- Most members are 35 and younger.



## Social Networking Research and Education

- Students ages 9-17 report spending the same amount of time social networking online as they do watching TV.
- 60% reported that the most popular topics were:
  - College Planning
  - Schoolwork
  - Learning outside of school
  - Careers

## Social Networking Exercise

- With a partner come up with a list of 3-5 things that might give your students a comparable social networking experience that is still course related?

## Tips/Golden Rules (Grades)

- Objective is better than subjective.
- Many short tests or assignments are better than fewer, longer ones.
- Everything should be clear in terms of numbers, percentages etc so that students can average their own grades
- Have an assignments where they can evaluate/grade their own work.
- Provide rubrics for everything subjective

## Tips/Golden Rules (feedback) THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT!!

- Remember, your feedback will usually be written-how did you respond to that as a student?
- 5-7 days after assignments are complete.
- Prepare students for feedback: remind them of assignment worth, grading scale, rubric, etc.
- Tell students when they can expect feedback.
- Whenever possible, let students participate.



## Tips/Golden Rules (assignments)

- Keep them short enough to allow you to respond with feedback in 5-7 days.
- Consider student time limits whenever possible.
- Projects or experiential assignments often work better than additional readings.
- Provide opportunities for students to share.
- Beware of group projects!!

## Helpful Websites!

- Sloan-C (online consortium).  
<http://www.sloan-c.org>
- JOLT (Merlot Journal of Online Learning and Teaching). <http://jolt.merlot.org/>
- American Journal of Distance Learning.  
<http://www.ajde.com/>
- International Journal of Distance Education Technologies. <http://jdet.mine.tku.edu.tw/>
- International Journal on E Learning.  
<http://www.aace.org/pubs/IJEL/>

## Closing Comments

- 1. Feedback is king.
- 2. Clarity: course requirements, grading process, schedule.
- 3. Needs: yours as well as the students.
- 4. Interactive: opportunities for sharing, personal growth (community).
- Keep it simple. The less time you spend grading, the more time you have for feedback and interaction.
- Stay flexible.

## Day Two (Lab)

- Require introductions (write out some questions for each student to answer that will allow other students to learn about their classmates as well as allow you an opportunity to get to know your students).
- 2. Syllabus: course requirements, grading process, weekly schedule, assignments and rubrics for each (if needed). Explain what you feel adequate participation is.



## Day Two (Lab)

- 3. A place for students to chat with other students.
- 4. A place for students to reach you confidentially.
- 5. Repeat: keep it simple. The less time you spend grading, the more time you have for feedback and interaction.
- 6. Allow for some flexibility for you as well as the students.
- Contact info-create several ways for you to reach students and students to reach you (retention).

## Additional Information

- I will be able to answer questions and help in any way for a limited time during the semester.
- My Contact information:  
[bradleyva@yahoo.com](mailto:bradleyva@yahoo.com)
- Phone: 415-203-4905